

I Could Be Your Love, But You Treat Me Like A Scandal

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I Could Be Your Love, But You Treat Me Like A Scandal

by [blazingparker](#)

Summary

Tony Stark has it all. He's a multi-billionaire, the brains behind Stark Industries. He's ready to take over as CEO of the company, poised to make billions more than he already has. Everyone knows that under his leadership, Stark Industries will continue to make billions and be one of the world's largest weapons manufacturers. So, why would he give all that up to run for the United States Senate? That's what Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Peter Parker is determined to find out.

Notes

So, for personal reasons, this is going to be my last fic. I can't wait to share this world with you all. I had planned on waiting until it was entirely written to post, but I'm going to post as much as I can write and do headcanons for whatever I can't. I hope to finish this, but we will see what happens!

Chapter 1

“You want to run for *what*?!”

Okay, so maybe springing the idea on Pepper and Rhodey wasn't Tony's best plan. But to be fair, how often does one explain to his two best friends that he doesn't want to take over a multi-billion dollar company just yet? Better yet, that he wants to put it off to run for the United States Senate?

“Tony, have you thought this through? Like, at all?” Rhodey added, and Tony scoffed from his spot on the couch. At least he'd done this in his penthouse instead of on a business level of Stark Tower, as he was pretty sure Pepper's shrieks would have carried through the entire floor.

“Of course I've thought this through,” Tony responded, casually draping an arm over the back of the couch. Pepper and Rhodey exchanged a glance from where they were seated in the armchairs across from him.

“It's probably already too late to file, it's September! The election is in less than two months!” Pepper pointed out, still sounding slightly dumbfounded by the entire thing.

“That's true. However, I can run as a write-in candidate. With my name, I'll get the attention I'd need from the press to get the word out. Plus, it's easy to remember me.” Tony's signature smirk settled on his face. He'd thought this through.

“But-why? You've never shown any sort of interest in politics. You've complained about bureaucratic bullshit on more than one occasion. The Senate isn't exactly conducive to spending all your time in a lab, either,” Rhodey asked, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back in his chair.

“Rhodey's right,” Pepper added on, nodding as she looked over at the Air Force colonel. “You're supposed to take over the company now - you're thirty! The board thinks you're ready, and-”

“Actually, the board doesn't think I'm ready,” Tony interrupted. “Apparently I'm immature, hot-headed, and unsure of what's best for the company.” He sniffed, crossing his arms over his chest in an imitation of his best friend sitting across from him.

“So you think that running for Senate will convince the board you're serious? What kind of plan is that?” Pepper asked, piecing together the rest of Tony's thought process.

“What's more serious than the government?”

“That's-that's not why people run for political office, Tones,” Rhodey protested. “People run for a lot of reasons - to benefit themselves, because they want power, to effect change for others. But I'm pretty sure you'd be the first and only person to run for *public office* to convince the investors of a *private company* that you're ready to take over as CEO.”

“That's why it's a perfect plan,” Tony said smugly, crossing his arms behind his head. “No one will see it coming - I waltz in, tell them I'm running to, I don't know, make sure we're making good investments in STEM and research projects. And if I manage to make business a little bit better for SI while I'm there, then that's just a bonus.”

“That's probably highly illegal,” Pepper pointed out.

“Why? I'm not CEO yet, I'm just a concerned private citizen,” Tony said, putting a hand over his

heart in mock offense.

“People also run for office when they’re well-liked, Tony. Your image isn’t exactly stellar. Do you know how people might react to you running? You know, you do need actual votes to win.” Rhodey raised an eyebrow at his friend, confident he’d thought of the one thing Tony hadn’t.

“Actually, yes. I had JARVIS run some scenarios, and in every one of them, the voters love me. I’m a billionaire, yes, which means a certain political party won’t care for me at first. But, I’ve made millions of dollars worth of charitable donations, my inventions help keep our troops safe, and Stark Industries is moving in the direction of being self-sustainable. Plus, I’m single, and--”

“Oh my *god*,” Pepper’s voice echoed as she buried her face in her hands.

“-- *and* that does well with voters. They love a handsome bachelor, and they’ll love me even more when they realize I’m running for *them*, to make things better for them. Or at least, that’s what my messaging will be.”

“You’re such an arrogant ass, Tony,” Rhodey said, but was unable to hide the smile that came to his face upon hearing the full plan.

“Don’t I know it,” Tony fired back immediately.

There was silence in the room for a few moments.

“We’re not gonna be able to talk you out of this, are we?” Rhodey asked with an exasperated sigh. Tony shook his head.

“Absolutely not. I’m telling you guys, this is a great plan. Besides, just think. *Senator Stark* has such a great ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Twin groans echoed through the room.

“I have an assignment for you.”

Peter looked up from his computer, where he was busy looking into the primary presidential candidates, trying to dig up any possible skeletons in their closets. He’d been working as an investigative journalist at the New York Times ever since he graduated from college. He was one of the youngest people ever to win a Pulitzer Prize, for a piece where he’d uncovered a ring of House members conspiring to use a pending nuclear arms deal as a vehicle to shove through a highly-inflated military budget to satisfy the military contractors donating to their campaigns.

Ever since, the twenty-six year old had been searching for his next big story. He had a passion for uncovering the truth, getting down to the core of people and discovering who they really were - for better or worse.

“Oh yeah? What is it?” Peter leaned back in his chair, picking up a pen and fiddling with it as his boss, J. Jonah Jameson, leaned against his desk.

“Pepper Potts is calling a last-minute press conference.” That caused Peter to raise an eyebrow - this was *Pepper Potts* they were talking about. She didn’t *do* ‘last-minute’.

“What about?” He asked, swiveling slightly in his chair and raising the end of his pen to his mouth.

“Nothing’s been officially announced, but word from a friend of mine over there says Tony Stark’s planning to run.” Jameson looked at Peter meaningfully, but for once the younger man wasn’t quick on the uptake.

“Run what? The New York City marathon?” He asked, confused. Tony Stark was a genius, sure, but spent most of his time shut in a lab. Not unlike Rapunzel in her tower.

“No, Parker. He wants to run for political office,” Jameson said with a roll of his eyes.

“Tony Stark? Political office?” Peter asked, leaning forward in his chair and dropping his pen to the floor. “You’re pranking me. Where’s Ned with the iPhone? Is this for the new TikTok account you guys made?” Peter looked around frantically for his friend.

“I’m not pranking you,” Jameson said, though he was unable to suppress a small chuckle. “Stark’s got his eye on the Senate seat.”

“Senate?” Peter asked, repeating his boss again as he sat there, incredulous. “The man’s never even run for a PTA, let alone the United States Congress. What’s his angle?” Peter stood up and began to pace, running both hands through his hair. “The man is a multi-billionaire already, poised to take over Stark Industries any day now. He was born into a dynasty of weapons manufacturers, he’s never had to think about other people a day in his life. Why would he screw that up? Why run?”

“That’s what I want you to figure out,” Jameson said, pushing off from where he’d been leaning against Peter’s desk. “All those questions? They’re good. I want them answered.”

“Then put me on his campaign. If that’s really what you want, and this is really what he’s going for, assign me to his campaign. Let me go to that press conference,” Peter said, ticking off the things he’d need on his fingers. “I know it’ll cost you, but something’s up here. Something isn’t right - there’s no way Tony Stark is running for office because he actually cares about the people or the issues. I’m your best chance at getting answers, I know you know it. Just let me--”

“Done,” Jameson said immediately. Peter blinked, taken aback.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Done,” Jameson repeated, shrugging. “I want this scoop. You’re right. Something’s fishy here, and you’re gonna figure out what it is. I’m assigning you to this.” Peter resisted the urge to pump a fist in the air, pulling it together in time to shake his boss’s hand and sit back down. He pulled out a notebook, starting to scribble down notes and questions he might want to ask at the press conference. He pulled up Tony Stark’s Wikipedia page, figuring that was as good a place as any to start his research.

“So, he’s got you researching Tony Stark, now?” A voice piped up, and Peter looked up from his computer to see his best friend, Ned.

“A multi-billionaire doesn’t just drop the chance to run a company for a Senate race. A race that is, might I add, heavily stacked against him and that he’s more than likely to lose,” Peter pointed out, going back to his notepad and scratching out something he wrote.

“Not to mention, he’s been the brains behind one of the biggest weapons manufacturers in the world for years now,” Ned mused, grabbing a chair and dragging it over to sit by his friend.

“Yeah,” Peter mused distractedly, too busy scratching out something he’d just written to properly reply to his friend.

“I just-I wanna make sure you’re sure you’re okay with this,” Ned continued. Peter paused, looking over at his friend and setting his pen down.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He asked with a slight frown.

“The guy’s...not a good person.” Peter snorted.

“Yeah, that’s putting it lightly.”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt or slandered because you’re daring to go up against him. You know how people get around him,” Ned pointed out. Peter nodded. He *did* know. Women seemed to forget how to function, and men were so caught up in trying to impress him that they ignored why they needed to meet with him.

“I’m not going to get hurt, Ned.” Peter took a deep breath, blowing it out and looking at the picture of Tony on his computer, the man’s signature smirk stretched across his face. Mocking Peter from a Wikipedia article.

“Something’s not right with Stark. I’m going to figure out what it is.”

Chapter 2

Running for Senate wasn't something Tony had ever seen himself doing. Everyone knew he had a brain hardwired for science, mathematics, and engineering - not for hand-shaking, baby-kissing, and politicking.

But desperate times called for desperate measures.

The board of investors for Stark Industries were nervous about him taking over. With his behavior as a bit of a playboy, they saw him as flighty. Irresponsible. A risk. The promise to deny him the position of CEO was fresh in Tony's mind.

It wasn't that he felt particularly strongly about the position. On the contrary, he felt like he could do much better work in the labs in a grease-stained shirt and with dirty hands than he could in an office parallel with the clouds, in a perfectly-tailored suit and making executive decisions.

What Tony did feel strongly about was the good he could do within that position.

Instead of being known for making the missiles that missed suicide bombers and hit civilian areas, they could be known for developing the first arc reactor. Instead of negotiating multi-billion dollar projects that brought about death and destruction, they could work on bringing sustainable energy to millions of people. Stark Industries had so much potential to do good, and to be a major player in bringing the world into the twenty-first century.

None of that would matter if Tony couldn't get into a position to effect change, though.

In retrospect, there were probably ways to prove he was serious that didn't involve running for public office, personally funding a campaign, and giving his two best friends a heart attack. Tony was desperate, though. The only people the board respected more than themselves were the politicians that kept getting contracts for SI to sign.

Tony figured if he could become one of those politicians, do some good for the company, and take a break from hiding in the lab long enough to get in the public's good graces, he might be able to prove himself.

He hated having to do that - prove himself to a team of people older than him, that profited from his inventions and didn't actually have to bother with doing much. That was the situation he found himself in, though, and he had to make the most of it.

"You ready?" Pepper's voice broke Tony out of his thoughts, the man startling slightly before standing up from his chair.

"Course I am," he said, straightening out his suit. He'd picked a gray suit with a simple purple tie and white pocket square, forgoing his usual pair of sunglasses. He wanted to appear open and honest, something that wouldn't be achieved if the voters couldn't look into his eyes.

Tony had done his research. He knew what to do.

"Okay, well there's a whole room full of press out there waiting for some big announcement, and I'm sure as hell not going to be the one to make it," Pepper prodded gently. "Are you having second thoughts? We can call it all off, play it off like some product isn't going quite right."

"No," Tony said, looking at her and finally away from the suit he'd been almost obsessively

running his hands over. As though smoothing out those fabric wrinkles would fix the ones threatening to rip apart his life. “No, we’re not calling it off. Let’s do this.”

Taking a deep breath, he strode out of the office he’d commandeered from some poor, frightened executive, and down to the room Pepper pointed out. The second he entered, the flashes of multiple cameras nearly blinded him and the small murmurs among the crowd died down to nothing. Tony stood at the podium, smiling out at the crowd gathered.

“Alright, you all know who I am so I’m going to skip the pleasantries and get straight down to business,” Tony said, addressing the room confidently. He tried to reach the right balance of authoritative but approachable, confident yet congenial. A few laughs sounded around the room, reporters shaking their heads fondly. Tony might spend most of his time in a lab, but his attitude was well-known. They hadn’t really expected anything less from him.

“There’s been a lot of speculation around when I’ll be taking over as CEO of Stark Industries,” he said, glancing down at the podium as though there were notes there for him to reference. There were none. He was Tony Stark - he didn’t stick to the cards. “As of now, those plans have been suspended indefinitely.”

There were a few shocked gasps and mumbles to colleagues, more flashing of cameras. He wasn’t surprised - the news was likely coming as a massive shock to most of these people.

“Mr. Stark-” A journalist rose, raising her hand.

“Ah, I’ve got more to get through here. So if you can wait, I promise you’ll be the first person I call on, okay?” Tony shot her a charming smile, the woman blushing fiercely before nodding and sinking back down into her seat.

“Great. What was I saying?” Tony paused for a second to make the funny line believable, like he really had forgotten what he was about to say next before getting interrupted. It made him look funny, casual, like one of the millions of people whose votes he’d have to get. “Right. Suspended indefinitely. And we’re not talking about my high school career.” There were a few chuckles, but the joke fell flat for others. Tony had been a genius child and hadn’t had the chance to get in trouble, a fact some journalists in the room seemed keenly aware of as he tried to appear relatable.

“Anyway, the point is,” Tony paused again, for dramatic effect this time. “I’m officially announcing my candidacy for the United States Senate.”

It was like he had announced the dissolution of Stark Industries, or maybe a plan to take over the government entirely. The room exploded, journalists jumping to their feet and shouting questions. The sound of camera shutters almost drowned them out, the frequency of the flashes in Tony’s face rapidly increasing.

“I understand you all have a lot of questions,” he practically yelled into the microphone, trying to regain control of the room. The frenzy died down slightly, but everyone in the room remained on their feet. “I know it’s unexpected, and I know it’s a lot to process.” *Understanding but not condescending*, Tony thought to himself. “I’m happy to answer questions, but let’s go one at a time. I might have graduated MIT at 20 but I can’t hear every question you’re asking at once.” More laughter, and thankfully the press gathered stayed calm and didn’t start screaming at him again. “Alright, let’s begin with the lovely woman who tried to speak earlier.”

The same woman rose, straightening her skirt and tossing her hair over one shoulder as a Stark Industries employee ran over with a microphone. With such a large room and so many people shuffling and whispering, not to mention the camera noise, Tony had wanted to be sure everyone

was easily heard.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” the woman began once the microphone was held firmly in hand. “Penelope Fitzgerald, ABC News.” She took a deep breath, seemingly to compose herself. “It’s September 24th. The deadline to file for a Senate run in New York was back in April. Are you saying you’re running as a write-in candidate?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Tony said with a nod. “I know I missed the deadline to file and appear on the ballot, by a *lot*.” Penelope’s amused smile was encouraging. “But I also think I could do some real good for the people of New York, and I wasn’t going to wait years for the chance. Especially when, if I were to take over as CEO of Stark Industries, it would make things a lot more difficult down the line if I wanted to run.”

Tony pointed to another reporter, an older man who eyed him with what looked like a mix of admiration and trepidation. “Yes, what’s your question?”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Stark. I’m Glenn Young, with NBC News. To clarify, are there *no* current plans to make you CEO?”

“As a result of my running, those have been suspended. Had I decided to run in a later year, I would have faced a lot more difficulty. Thanks for the chance to clarify, Glenn.” Tony nodded respectfully in the man’s direction.

“Another quick question then,” Glenn continued, not quite phrasing it as a question but clearly hesitating to give Tony a chance to shut it down.

Tony had to hand it to himself - he had a way of charming people, disarming them and making them forget why they were there. It was literally this guy’s job to ask questions, and it seemed like he was asking permission to do so.

“Sure, Glenn. Go ahead,” Tony said, waving a hand in a gesture inviting the man to continue.

“Why are you running? You mentioned making a difference for voters, but there’s got to be more to it, right?”

“Absolutely,” Tony said immediately. He didn’t want to look like he had no idea why he was running - a haphazard, directionless candidate meant the campaign would come crashing to the ground before it even took off. Looking directly into the cameras, he straightened a bit more and addressed the room confidently. “New York is an incredible state, one I’ve been proud to call home all my life. We’re home to the greatest city in the world. We lead the country, and I’d go so far as to say the world, by our example. Our incredible citizens deserve nothing better than stellar representation in Congress, and I think I’m the best man for the job. We’ll see what the voters think in the end, but I’m committed to proving to them I’m worthy of their trust, their confidence, and their vote.”

There was a small smattering of applause. From a room full of people who were supposed to remain impartial, Tony considered that a win.

The press conference continued like that, with reporters who were known hard-hitters throwing him soft, easy questions that he knocked out of the park with ease.

A question about his campaign platform - what were the issues he cared about most?

“I’m so glad you asked, because I’m so passionate about my platform. I care deeply about making sure we have the best funding for research labs across the country. American scientists are doing

ground-breaking work, from artificial intelligence to cancer research. If I can't be in the lab alongside every single one of them, I feel the least I can do is make sure they have the funding they need to succeed."

A follow-up question. Why not just donate privately?

"I would answer your question with a question: why make these labs dependent on benevolent private citizens? Our government should be proud to make investments in the future, in the betterment of life for all Americans. That kind of work shouldn't rely on me, or anyone for that matter."

One woman started to ask which political party he was going to run under, and Tony held up a hand in the middle of her question.

"I'm gonna stop you right there. I'm not really into the whole, two-parties-fighting-each-other-all-the-time-but-claim-to-work-together-for-the-spirit-of-bipartisanship-or-whatever thing." Tony squinted, tilting his head to the side slightly and allowing one side of his mouth to quirk up in a facial expression conveying his distaste for the matter. "I'm running as an Independent. If you've got another question, I'll be happy to answer. I promise I won't interrupt this time." An easygoing smile and a wink, and the woman was practically melting under the attention.

This was going well. Almost too well. A glance over at Pepper told Tony that even she was impressed. He knew he sounded like a natural, had studied old press conferences and speeches of successful candidates, the intonations and certain phrases drilled into his mind.

The control, the careful ease Tony had cast over the room shattered when he gestured for a younger man to ask a question. All fluffy brown hair and wide doe eyes, he looked like he belonged in a palace, being fed the finest food from around the world and having his every need or want attended to. He looked like he was just out of college, barely more than an intern and certainly not experienced enough to be holding his own at a Stark Industries press conference. Especially not one of such magnitude. Tony was smitten at first sight, something he hoped to whoever might be up there that it didn't show for the cameras. He didn't need his image as America's most eligible bachelor being destroyed before they'd even had a chance to let it help his campaign.

"Peter Parker, New York Times," the reporter said when he took the microphone. His voice was like music to Tony's ears, sweet and lilting slightly. He didn't stammer, flush, or trip over his words like the other reporters. Despite being visibly much younger than the rest, he exuded a sort of easy self-confidence that had Tony dying to get to know him better.

"Hi Peter, how are you?" Tony asked, smiling at the man and tilting his head to the side slightly. He could hear Pepper's frustrated muttering about *was he seriously flirting right now*, but he ignored it.

Peter, for his part, just gave Tony a little half-smile. "I'm doing alright. I'd like to get to my question though."

"Go ahead. Ask all the questions you like," Tony said. "I'm an open book."

"Great," Peter said, smile growing slightly before it dropped from his face. "Mr. Stark, what would you say to constituents who are concerned about someone with direct ties to one of the world's largest weapons manufacturers sitting in our nation's government?"

His voice, previously sweet and gentle, was commanding and strong in the same way Tony's had

been when gaining control over the room earlier. His wide Bambi eyes, disarming and cute, were gone. The reporter was squinting at him slightly, like if he stared hard enough he'd see right through the careful armor Tony had built around himself and straight to his truth.

Tony had a feeling he'd be successful if that's really what he wanted.

He couldn't dwell on that now, though. He had a question - and one he had *no* idea how to answer. Everyone had loved him so far, giving him those easy questions. He hadn't expected Peter to be any different. So, in classic Tony Stark fashion, he deflected and flirted.

"I'd tell them not to send such a pretty reporter next time so that I can actually focus on the question. Do you like Italian? I know a great place a couple blocks up."

Wrong thing to say, Tony thought to himself as he watched Peter raise an eyebrow and heard him let out a derisive scoff. He raised the microphone to his mouth again.

"Unlike most things in your life, I'd imagine, you can't buy me. So if you don't mind, *Mr. Stark*, would you answer the damn question?"

Ouch.

That stung, but even in his shocked stupor Tony knew he kind of deserved it. He'd blatantly hit on a guy just trying to do his job. That was grade-A asshole behavior. He could practically hear the lecture from Pepper already.

Speaking of Pepper, she was striding up to the podium, gently shouldering Tony out of the way.

"That's going to conclude things for today, everyone. We'll share updates with you, as well as a campaign schedule shortly."

Peter Parker let out a laugh as Pepper tried to nudge Tony out of the room, glancing around as if to confirm everyone else saw what he just had. "Seriously? Alright." He shook his head, bending down to grab his bag and slinging it over his shoulder. Tony just caught the words "easiest assignment ever" being muttered under his breath as the journalist swept out of the room, all eyes on him. Tony's eyes were *not* on his ass, thanks.

"Who was that?" He asked Pepper as they exited.

"He's an investigative journalist for the Times. He won a Pulitzer last year," Pepper debriefed him while they headed for the penthouse. "Parker's intense, and damn good at his job. Everyone in the business knows it. We'll prep you so that doesn't happen again. I can take him off the list if you want."

"No, don't." Tony smirked a little, glancing back towards the room like Peter might still be there. "I like him. In fact, let's give him a one-on-one interview."

"I'm not setting up an opportunity for you to flirt." Pepper sighed as Tony fixed her with a look, somehow simultaneously demanding and pleading. "Your funeral," she relented with a shrug. "Or rather, your failed Senate campaign." She strode off in the direction of the elevator, Tony taking out his phone and pulling up a profile on the young Pulitzer winner. The soft, easygoing smile that Peter wore in the attached photo was misleading, making him look like an innocent boy rather than a clever journalist who knew how to get a story. Tony knew better now.

If Tony had finally met his match, he was confident it was in one Peter Parker.

Chapter 3

Disconnected Billionaire Mounts Write-In Senate Campaign. By Peter Parker.

On Monday, Tony Stark hosted a press conference at Stark Industries to announce his candidacy for the United States Senate. While adept at giving cookie-cutter answers that make him look like he's serious, it's painfully clear he is oblivious as to what he's just stepped into.

"Ouch, tell us how you really feel." Peter looked up from his keyboard to find Ned standing there with two iced coffees. He slid one across the desk to Peter, pulling up a chair again. "Was the press conference that bad?"

"No, actually," Peter was loath to admit it, but wouldn't lie. "He did really well for the first portion. He got control over the room, connected with the reporters, and answered their softball questions." Pushing back from his desk slightly, he took the coffee and sipped at it.

"Softball questions?" Ned questioned, scooching closer. Though he worked on the communications side of the office, he found what the journalists did to be fascinating and was always eager to learn more.

"Yeah, like easy questions. What's your platform, what party are you, are you running as a write-in candidate?" Peter counted the questions off, rolling his eyes and taking another sip of coffee. "It was ridiculous. Not one question about the fact that Stark's supposed to take over a worldwide arms manufacturer. Nothing about his billion-dollar government contracts. Nothing about how he has no political experience and wants to use the Senate as his playground." He slammed his coffee down on the desk a little too hard, wincing and muttering an apology to his friend.

"What did you do?" Ned asked with a knowing grin. Peter looked at him, having the grace to look somewhat sheepish.

"I, uh. I might have sworn at him," he said, rubbing the back of his neck and blushing as Ned started to laugh a little louder than was probably appropriate for the office. Peter filled him in on everything, grinning a little more at the knowledge his best friend was getting a kick out of the story.

"And now you're about to ream him out in the press," Ned said, gesturing to the barely-written article on Peter's computer. The journalist shrugged, the hint of a blush still present on his face.

"I wouldn't call it that. I'd call it telling the truth. Stark is bad news for New York, okay? He's not in tune with voters, probably couldn't even name the incumbent Senator he's running against, and would be a walking disaster if he ran," Peter explained.

"Sounds like he's a walking disaster whenever he sees you," Ned teased. Peter flushed darker, shoving his friend playfully.

"Shut up, man. Let me work." Ned chuckled and disappeared back to his office, leaving the young Pulitzer winner to his work.

The echoes of a deep voice saying *Hi, Peter*, twinkling brown eyes, and a smile that was actually somewhat warm and inviting rather than smug and insincere swirled in his brain. Shaking his head, Peter put in his earbuds and continued to type. He wouldn't be one of those women who swooned in Tony Stark's presence, and he wouldn't be one of those men who fell over themselves to impress him.

He wouldn't.

The smack of a heavy newspaper hitting the table next to him caused Tony to jump, dropping the screwdriver in his hand and placing a hand over his heart.

"Are you trying to kill me?" He asked, putting down the part of Dum-E's arm that he'd been fixing. He looked up to see Pepper, an incredible mix of frustration and admiration on her face. Something told him the admiration wasn't for him. Looking down at the paper, his eyes skimmed the headline and he frowned slightly.

Disconnected Billionaire Mounts Write-In Senate Campaign.

Tony's frown tilted upwards into a little grin as he took in the byline.

"Why are you smiling over this? Parker's a well-respected journalist, and he just hit you with a heavy blow before you're properly out of the starting gate! You're going to be playing catch-up in your own campaign!" Pepper exclaimed, throwing her hands up as she saw the look on Tony's face.

"I was already playing catch-up, Pep," Tony pointed out, picking up the paper and skimming the rest of the article. "According to our dear friend Mr. Parker, that's what I'd be doing in the Senate, too."

"Well, he's not entirely wrong," Pepper grumbled. "Nothing in there is untrue. At least with other papers, you could rebut them with an argument over sensationalization or exaggeration. No wonder the kid won a Pulitzer."

"While adept at giving cookie-cutter answers that make him look like he's serious, it's painfully clear he is oblivious as to what he's just stepped into," Tony quoted from the article. "This is what I get for not answering the question. He's got valid concerns."

"Well, you didn't have an answer."

"No, but that's not a reason to not answer it. That's a reason to find the answer." Tony held up a hand when Pepper started to protest. "Listen to this: Stark seems blissfully unaware of the realities New Yorkers face every day. While he hid in his tower for years, real people struggled with homelessness, poverty, and the constant pressures of trying to make ends-meet in one of the most expensive cities in the world." Tony sat there, stunned into silence before he continued to read. "He claims to want to make things better for the average New Yorker, but how can he do that when he's never even been one?"

Silence descended over the lab again. Neither one of them seemed to know what to say, staring at the newspaper as Tony gently set it down again.

"He's good," Pepper eventually said, voice much softer than before. "From the looks of things online, people agree with him, too."

"I've got an event on Thursday. It's out at one of the affordable housing construction projects that SI is funding," Tony said, leaping into action. One bad headline was fine. Peter Parker might be well-respected, sure, but they could get back in control of the narrative. He didn't plan on slandering the man - he was doing his job and hadn't said anything that wasn't true.

Tony Stark wanted to prove Peter Parker wrong.

“Yeah, what about it?” Pepper asked when Tony fell silent.

“Is he on the list?”

“He’s the assigned reporter from the New York Times,” Pepper said with a huff of laughter. “He’s *always* on the list.”

“Great.” Tony stood, grabbing the newspaper and tucking it under his arm. “We’ll prove him wrong.” With that, he swept out of the room and headed up to his penthouse to prepare. If he was going to get anyone to admit they were wrong, especially someone as savvy and intelligent as Peter Parker, then he was going to have to put everything he had into this event.

Three days after Tony Stark announced his plans to the country, Peter and Ned pushed open the doors of the New York Times building and started walking in the direction of the next Stark campaign event. It was Stark’s first public appearance, and was happening at the site of a construction project his company was funding. It was supposed to provide affordable housing, but the project was so behind-schedule it was laughable, and the process to try and get one of those apartments was such a mess that even Peter couldn’t figure it out.

“I can’t believe I get to go with you,” Ned said, gripping the camera slung around his neck tightly and beaming over at his best friend. “I get to see you in action!”

“It’s not really in action, Ned. He probably won’t even call on me again after that shitshow on Monday. He won’t if he listens to his campaign advisors, at least.” *Did Stark even have campaign advisors? He didn’t seem the type to take advice from literally anyone.*

Peter jotted down a note in his notebook to remind himself to look into that later on.

“Still, it’s nice to get out of the office if nothing else,” Ned said with a shrug. Peter grinned at him. The way his best friend never lost his enthusiasm was almost infectious.

Making their way to the event, Peter raised an eyebrow when he saw how little decoration there was. No Stark campaign banners, no roped off areas or decorative stages with balloons and a podium.

He was almost impressed. At least Stark knew not to unnecessarily disrupt an active construction site. Peter couldn’t fault him for having the event here, it was a visual representation of the good work he would supposedly make sure Congress funded. He *could* have faulted him for all of the extravagance he was sure he would find, but there was none.

Peter and Ned made their way to the press area, which was really just barely separated from the crowd of supporters. He was surprised to see a couple hundred people gathered, wearing sunglasses like Tony’s signature pair and carrying homemade signs.

“Does this guy have a merch store? Or did they make their own stuff?” Ned asked.

“Looks like they made their own. It seems Stark has some supporters after all, I’m surprised,” Peter mumbled back, taking notes. Ned just nodded, wrapped up in taking photos of everything. He was one of their best photographers, and Peter knew whatever shots he sent along for the article would look absolutely incredible.

“Good afternoon everyone!” Their attention was drawn as Pepper Potts walked out onto a simple wooden platform that Peter hadn’t noticed before. It raised her about a foot above the crowd,

making her easily visible without requiring a lot of setup and teardown. She didn't even have a microphone, just speaking clearly to the group gathered.

"I'm so pleased to see everyone here, and thanks to our friends in the press for coming out here as well." Pepper gave a wave in their general direction, but it wasn't returned as everyone's hands were full with pens, recorders, and cameras. "I never thought I'd be up here, introducing someone for a *very* last-minute Senate campaign." She paused, allowing for laughter to fill the space. "But I don't think Tony ever saw himself at the center of that very campaign. He's incredibly excited to get to work for you all, but I'll let you hear it from him. Please welcome Tony Stark!" Pepper stepped back, clapping, as Tony climbed onto the stage and waved to the cheering crowd.

"Good afternoon everyone, and thanks so much for coming out." Tony flashed the crowd a smile. "I wanted to bring you here to the site of the first Stark Industries Housing Initiative project. We're working to bring affordable housing to New Yorkers in need. No one should live on the streets and suffer that loss of dignity when they're genuinely trying to make a living. We've all needed a hand up at some point in our lives. I'm overjoyed I can extend my hand for even a few people with this project."

Peter ignored writing exact quotes, knowing Ned was getting it all on camera. He focused on Stark's overall appearance. At first glance, he appeared confident and self-assured, shoulders back and hands moving animatedly as he spoke. Peter could see the practiced ease in those movements, and wondered when Tony had made the time to perfect this politician persona he'd assembled.

"It was pointed out in the press recently that I've been living in a tower with my name on it while others struggle to put a roof over their heads," Stark continued, and Peter's head snapped up from where he'd bent to write down more notes.

He'd read the article.

"The reporter that wrote that piece was absolutely correct."

Fucking what?!

"I've had it easy, and far too many of you haven't." Stark put his hands in his pockets, looking somewhat like a child shamed for misbehaving in class. It was almost endearing. *Almost*. "As your Senator, I wouldn't forget that. I've had a privileged life, I've been blessed with money and opportunities that most people work their whole lives towards. I haven't acknowledged that, and that was wrong of me."

The crowd was silent, hanging onto his every word.

"This project is a physical reminder of my commitment to each and every New Yorker. You deserve, at the bare minimum, access to everything you need to thrive. And I believe that starts with a roof over your head. I won't forget that, and it would be my honor to fight for you, to make sure it's not forgotten in Washington, D.C, either."

The crowd cheered loudly, chanting Stark's name and waving their signs. Stark made a few other remarks, but Peter was focused on his notepad and barely heard him.

With the other politicians he'd profiled, the response had been threats. Threats of lawsuits, threats to get him fired, death threats from their supporters. With Stark, he'd...admitted he was wrong? And apologized?

Peter prided himself on how hard it was to surprise or shock him, but he was stunned speechless.

“With that, I’ll open it up for questions. I’d like to start with our friend, Mr. Parker.” Peter looked up at Tony with wide eyes, glancing back down at his notepad and then making his way to the front. For once, he felt a slight tremor in his hand as he opened his mouth to speak.

“Mr. Stark,” he started, and Tony smiled at him widely.

“Good to see you, Peter,” the man interrupted. Peter stared at him, brain short-circuiting for a split second.

“Yeah, uh, for sure. Mr. Stark, on Monday you said, and I’m paraphrasing, that good work shouldn’t be reliant on benevolent private citizens for funding. Are you changing your mind on that stance, given you took credit for the fact that this is funded entirely by you but haven’t made any mention of a proposed national or government-funded plan to combat homelessness and the housing crisis?”

It was so quiet Peter swore he heard the gravel crunch under the sneaker of a shifting civilian. Stark, for his part, was staring at him like he’d grown a second head. Fighting to keep the smirk off his face, Peter waited patiently for an answer.

Stark might have learned a thing or two from reading the article, but he still hadn’t figured out how to answer the tough questions.

“No,” Tony said after a beat too long for it to have been a casual pause. “I’m happy to do this, but the government should step up and do their share so that private citizens don’t have to-”

“Have to? Are you saying you’re doing this out of a sense of obligation?” Peter interrupted.

“Of course not,” Tony shot back immediately. “I just-I meant that private citizens aren’t responsible for the well-being of all others. At least, according to the Constitution. That’s the government’s job.”

“Congratulations, Mr. Stark, you’ve proved you know as much about civics as a sixth-grader,” Peter deadpanned with a roll of his eyes. To his credit, Tony didn’t get angry. The corner of his mouth quirked up, like he wanted to smile but was reining it in for the audience.

“What’s your issue with me, Mr. Parker?” He asked, though his tone was friendly.

“I don’t have an issue with you, Mr. Stark,” Peter said honestly with a shrug. “I have a city to report to, and they count on me to deliver answers. It’s not my fault you’re bad at giving them.”

There were a few shocked mutters and gasps among the crowd, but Tony and Peter paid them no mind. They stared each other down, intense but not hostile.

“Saturday at eleven,” Stark said all of a sudden. “I’m giving you an exclusive interview.”

“Why?” Peter asked, furrowing his brow in confusion.

“You said it yourself. You owe the constituents answers, and I think that’s a noble goal. This way we’ll have plenty of time for you to get the good answers you need.” Stark stuck his hand out, and Peter hesitated before shaking it.

“You’ve got a deal.”

Chapter 4

Saturday morning proved to be a dreary day in the city that never sleeps. Dark gray clouds settled over the buildings, rain pouring down on anyone brave enough to step out from under the cover of buildings or cars.

In one part of the city, a mechanic-turned-politician agonized over whether he should wear a suit or something more casual. Gentle brown eyes and a sweet smile that hid razor-sharp wit and intelligence haunted his every move.

In another part of the city, a Pulitzer prize winner stared at his clothing options and sat down heavily on his bed, wondering what he'd done to steer his life in the direction where he'd be sitting down for a private interview with Tony Stark of all people.

Things hadn't improved for the billionaire. Peter had published a scathing review of the campaign event, and his clear stumbles while answering questions had caused voters to question whether he'd actually thought all of this through. Perhaps, they thought, this was just an impulse decision that would have real effects on their lives.

Tony dressed in a smart-looking blue suit, a color that Pepper insisted looked really good on him. Pairing it with a silver tie and pocket square, he spent way more time in front of the mirror than he normally did. Eventually, the elevator doors opened to reveal Rhodey, who shook his head fondly at the sight of his best friend clearly agonizing over his appearance.

"You look fine," he called out as he strode over to Tony's side, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Yeah?" Tony asked, for once actually slightly unsure of himself.

"Yeah," Rhodey said with a small laugh. "Man, this guy sure has you in a twist."

"His name's Peter," Tony replied, finally looking over at his friend. "Rhodey, he's not like any guy I've ever met."

"I'll say. He didn't fall to the floor or drop his pants when you blatantly flirted with him."

"It's not just that, though." Rhodey laughed a little more as Tony refused to deny the effect he had on people. "He's smart as a whip. Did Pepper tell you about the Pulitzer?"

"She did."

"He asks questions that are actually *good*, too. Stuff that matters."

"Questions that you don't know how to answer, Tony. I get the guy is crazy smart. I get that he's totally your type. But are you sure this is a good idea?" Rhodey's gaze was somewhat concerned. He didn't want his friend to run his plan into the ground because he was smitten with a witty reporter.

"No," Tony admitted, straightening his tie for the umpteenth time that morning. "But he's got a point. He's the only one asking me about real issues. Peter's the only one that makes me—that makes me think about what I could really do in the Senate."

The only one to make his heart skip a beat for non-alcohol related reason.

“Alright. As long as you’re sure. I just have a feeling this guy’s gonna deliver the verbal smackdown of the century. Thursday was not a good look for you,” Rhodey said with a shrug.

“You saw that?” Tony asked as he crossed the penthouse to get a mug of coffee.

“It was televised, Tony. People all over the country saw that. It was trending on Twitter.” Rhodey followed him, heading to get his own mug.

“Pepper didn’t say anything,” Tony said, confused.

“Probably because most of the attention wasn’t really focused on you not answering the question well.”

“What was it focused on then?” Tony asked, sliding a full mug over to his friend. Rhodey looked somewhat sheepish as he pulled out his phone and handed it over.

“I think it’s best that you look and see for yourself.” With a raised eyebrow, Tony took the phone and actually laughed out loud as he read the tweets.

Peter Parker + Tony Stark = the forbidden love I didn’t know I needed.

Consider me a Starker fan - holy shit they’re so cute together!!!

Tony continued laughing as he passed the phone back to his friend. As long as the incident was garnering some good press for him. Any news was good news, and attaching himself to an attractive, savvy journalist certainly wouldn’t hurt.

He did feel slightly guilty when he realized it *might* hurt Peter. His career depended on journalistic integrity - something that dissipated the second people started implying he was sleeping or flirting with a candidate he was covering. Tony didn’t have time to dwell on that though, and he was confident Peter knew what was best for his career and could take care of himself. As if on cue, JARVIS piped up.

“It appears Mr. Parker has just entered the building, sir.”

“Great.” Tony clapped his hands together, patting Rhodey on the back and making his way to the elevator. “See you later, platypus!”

“See you,” Rhodey called back, shaking his head at his friend.

Tony exited the elevator, striding through the lobby and almost tripping over his feet as Peter came into view. He was wearing a simple black suit with a green tie that brought out the little gold flecks in his eyes. There was no other way to describe it - he looked incredibly sexy. Peter’s hair looked like it had been styled at some point, but the wind and rain outside had allowed a few adorable curls to spring free and fall forward. The umbrella in his hand was steadily dripping water onto the floor.

“Mr. Stark!” The reporter exclaimed, a little surprised to turn and see the billionaire standing there. The voice spurred Tony into action, and he walked the rest of the way to shake his hand again. Tony would be lying if he said the touch didn’t send shivers down his spine.

“I think we’re past calling each other by formal titles, don’t you?” Tony said, relishing in the little blush that rose to Peter’s cheeks. He put his hands in his pockets, wanting to make sure he looked

casual but not like he wasn't in total control.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Peter said, glancing away and fidgeting slightly with the collar of his shirt.

Interesting. Tony took down a mental note. It was clear the man in front of him was incredibly smart - he'd known that since the minute they met. But what was interesting was how, despite being visibly flustered, he never lost the courage or the willpower to ask the tough questions. Tony could flirt with him, sure, but couldn't charm him.

That was new.

And intriguing.

"Well, given that you've made a fool of me in two different settings, one of which being on national television, I think you can just call me Tony. Can I call you Peter?" Tony winked at the smaller man in front of him, delighting in the sweet little half-smile he elicited from him.

"Sure...Tony." Peter glanced away before looking back at the man. "I know it probably doesn't mean much, but I didn't mean to humiliate you or anything. I'm not going to apologize for it, because I was just doing my job, but I'm not...I don't ask those questions just to try and make you look stupid." Peter adjusted his grip on his umbrella, and he shivered slightly. It was at that moment Tony realized he'd just walked over in a downpour and had to be freezing.

"I wouldn't expect you to apologize. What I do expect is for you to come get a hot cup of coffee and maybe a blanket. Then we can start. I won't have my interviewer freezing to death in my building." Tony gently placed a hand on Peter's shoulder, guiding him to the elevator.

"Seriously?" Peter looked at him, clearly shocked. "I have a whole list of questions, and I know you're a busy man. I'm grateful for the time and don't want to waste any."

"Peter, relax." Tony said as they entered the elevator and he hit the button for his personal labs. "I've cleared my schedule for the day. We've got all the time you want. If you're too busy sneezing to get the questions out, how are we going to get through the interview?"

Peter was silent for a moment. Then, a soft shuffle as he gently kicked his shoe against the floor. "Alright. So long as the interview isn't affected."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Peter wasn't entirely sure how they ended up in Tony's personal labs, sitting in a comfortable armchair by a wall made of glass, looking out over the city. A blanket that had no business being so soft was draped over his shoulders and he looked up to find Tony standing beside him.

"Warmer?"

"Yeah, actually. Thanks." Peter gave him a smile.

It had become increasingly clear that Tony Stark might not be as bad as Peter had made him out to be. He took the tough questions in stride, even if he didn't answer them well, and never insulted Peter or tried to belittle him. Now, he was wrapping blankets around him and clearing a Saturday afternoon to sit down for a one-on-one interview that most journalists would have killed to get.

“How do you take your coffee?” Tony asked, and Peter swiveled slightly in his seat to look over at him, finding the man standing next to a full coffee pot.

“Oh, I take my coffee iced, actually,” he said, then inwardly cringed. He had no reason to divulge that information, and he should have been polite and just accepted the coffee.

“It’s almost October,” Tony said, clearly a little shocked by the answer.

“I know.”

“You do realize it’s going to keep getting colder, right? And you’re drinking an *iced* drink?”

“I’m asserting my dominance over the cold.” Tony barked out a laugh at that, eyes crinkling at the corners and clapping his hands together like a delighted child. Peter smiled and ducked his head, feeling more like a smitten man in his twenties rather than a decorated reporter.

“Alright, well would a cup of hot chocolate break your dominance streak? Or is that allowed?” Tony asked, a playful twinkle in his eyes as he moved to get some mugs.

“Hot chocolate is just fine. Thanks, Mr. Stark.” Peter nodded, looking over at the man and tracking his movements as he pulled out milk, marshmallows, and something Peter couldn’t quite see.

“Tony.”

“...thanks, Tony.”

A few minutes later, a Stark Industries mug full of hot chocolate topped with marshmallows was pressed into Peter’s cold fingers. Tony finally sat down in the chair across from him, holding his own mug full of the warm liquid. Peter gave him a smile of thanks, taking a sip. His eyes widened comically barely a second later, the young man unable to believe the delicious flavor, perfect temperature, and the additional sweetness of a marshmallow.

“This is incredible,” he said, smiling as Tony laughed. Vaguely, he wondered why he was letting his guard down this much around the other man. There was no reason for Peter to be friendly with him - he was here for answers, not a friend. He could have kept this strictly professional.

Maybe it was that glint in Tony’s eyes, promising more depth and intelligence than he’d displayed so far.

Maybe it was the way Tony accepted the criticism and genuinely tried to do better, rather than trying to bribe Peter to shut up and walk away, or threatening him and his loved ones.

Maybe it was their moment at the press conference, where Peter swore Tony’s gaze flickered down to his lips just as a small smile formed along his own.

Wait-when had he started thinking of the other man as Tony?

“Where’d you learn to make hot chocolate like this?” Peter asked, brushing his thoughts aside and deliberately avoiding looking at where Tony was licking a bit of hot chocolate off of his lips.

“Starting the interview already, are we?” Tony said with a grin, and Peter chuckled quietly.

“Consider this your warm-up. Off the record.”

“How generous of you.” Peter bristled slightly before seeing the wink Tony sent his way. The man was joking, not being an asshole.

Settle down, Parker.

“My mom taught me, actually.” Peter blinked at Tony, staying quiet instead of jumping in with a follow-up like other journalists might have. That was one of his talents, and what made him such a damn good reporter. He knew when to ask good questions, and *what* to ask, but he also knew when to shut up and listen. Sure enough, Tony continued.

“She was the light of my life. Most moms are, I’m sure you love your mom.” Peter bit his tongue, an ache flashing through his chest the way it always did when he was reminded of his lost parents. “Whenever it snowed for the first time, she’d take me out of school and we’d go out to play in it. Even when I was at MIT.” Something in Tony’s demeanor changed, tension and apprehension melting out of his shoulders as he spoke about his mother. “When we were done, she’d make us this hot chocolate and we’d sit by the fire and watch a movie. After she passed, I, uh-” Tony swallowed hard, and Peter thought he saw the man blink back tears. “I found the recipe. I think I made about a thousand copies so I’d never lose it. And now I make it for myself.”

“That’s beautiful,” Peter said softly, sincere as he looked at Tony. “That’s a beautiful memory, and a wonderful way to keep her memory with you.” Even if they hadn’t been off-the-record, Peter knew he’d never share that story with anyone else. It was a glimpse of the *real* Tony Stark, without all the money and politics and everything else. Peter wasn’t sure why, but he knew he’d treasure it going forward.

“Thank you,” Tony said, taking another sip. “What about you? Did your mom ever make you hot chocolate?”

Peter took a deep breath, lowering his mug from where he’d about to drink some more. “My parents died when I was six. I don’t really remember.”

“I’m sorry, I had no-”

“It’s fine. Really. In fact, please don’t finish that. I had a great childhood even without my parents, I don’t need your pity.” Peter held up a hand.

“You don’t have my pity. You have my sympathies,” Tony said seriously. As their gazes met, Peter couldn’t help but believe him.

“My Aunt May makes the best chocolate chip cookies, though,” he said after a moment. He felt like he should give Tony *something*, some glimpse into who he was in the way Tony had just done for him.

“Oh yeah?” Tony asked, leaning forward slightly.

“Yeah, they’re killer. She always makes them for holidays and big events, and they’re gone within minutes,” Peter explained with a little laugh as he remembered one Christmas, where Ned practically lunged for the platter before May had even set it down.

“Sounds delicious.” Tony said. Peter just nodded, and silence settled over the room for a moment before the reporter shook himself out of it.

“Shall we get started, Tony?”

“Let’s do it.” Peter pulled out his phone, setting it to record the conversation and getting his notepad ready to take notes.

“So, let’s start with the basics. What plans are you hoping to bring to fruition in the Congress?”

Peter asked, pen hovering over the paper as he looked at Tony.

“I plan to make things better for all New Yorkers. I want to bring about positive change for the citizens, and make their lives better.”

“How?” Peter asked. He’d heard that answer before, at the campaign’s launch event, and had no interest in letting that be the final word on the subject.

“How?” Tony repeated, and Peter resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Yes. How. Do you have policy proposals? An idea for a committee? People to bring into the Senate to testify on these vague issues you’re referring to? Is there someone in Congress who you’d want to work with to make that change happen?”

Tony stared at him blankly, and Peter huffed out a sigh, waiting.

“I think we need policy, and I’m going to bring my proposals with me to the Senate and reveal them there,” Tony said slowly. Peter raised an eyebrow. “Wrong answer?”

“Needing policy is kind of obvious,” he said with a scoff. “And most candidates reveal their plan first to convince the voters they know what they’re doing, and to allow people to vote for the ideas they like the best. Not just the person they like the best. So, yes. Wrong answer.”

Tony sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

“How would you have answered that question, then?”

“Excuse me?”

“If you were in my shoes, how would you have answered your question? Assuming there’s no specific policy plan yet.” Peter sighed, thinking for a moment.

“First, I’d thank the journalist for the opportunity to discuss my plans in greater detail. It’s incredibly important that the people of New York know what I’d be working towards if elected to the Senate, and exactly how I plan to go about it. While I’m passionate about STEM education and increased funding for ground-breaking research, I’m still working on a specific policy proposal. I hope to have it ready for the public to review shortly, and would welcome any further questions on it at that time.”

Tony stared at him, shaking his head and chuckling. “Damn, Parker. Which one of us is the politician?”

“Neither of us, apparently,” Peter snarked, setting his mug down on the side table and crossing his arms.

“Ouch.”

“It’s true. It doesn’t matter how charismatic and charitable you are. If you don’t have real plans, the public is never going to take you seriously. If you don’t learn how to answer tougher questions than the crap you got when you announced, your campaign is going to be six feet under before it even gets off the ground.”

“You’re optimistic,” Tony deadpanned.

“I’m calling it as I see it. You don’t stand a chance.” Peter shrugged.

“Help me, then,” Tony said, standing up and crossing over to Peter’s chair. The other man rose to meet him, blanket pooling at his feet.

“Help you?” Peter asked.

“Teach me how to answer the hard questions. Teach me how to do better, how to show the voters I’m serious.” Tony looked at Peter eagerly, the reporter simply raising an eyebrow again.

“I’m not going to coddle you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” Tony said immediately. Peter sighed, glancing at his watch and then back up into Tony’s eyes.

“Let's do it, then.”

Chapter 5

“Alright, let’s do this. Dum-E, U, I need rows of chairs on this side of the room, and a podium on this side.” Tony sprang into action, clapping his hands and getting his robots to work.

“And I need a squirt gun,” Peter added.

“And Peter needs a-” Tony turned to look at him, raising one eyebrow. “A *what?*”

“I said I wasn’t going to coddle you. This is the Parker method. Take it or leave it,” Peter said with a shrug, smiling when Tony ordered the robots to find him a squirt gun. The two of them helped clear and prepare the lab, pushing tables to the side and making way for the robots to add the chairs and the podium.

“Alright, might as well make ourselves comfortable,” Tony said, taking off his tie and unbuttoning the top button of his shirt. Peter hurriedly looked away, swallowing hard. He found himself imagining following that expanse of tan skin lower, where it disappeared under the shirt, maybe even untucking that shirt from those slacks and sneaking a hand under--

Woah.

What the fuck, Parker?

Peter hoped his face wasn’t as red as it felt, coughing awkwardly and turning around, pretending to straighten out one of the chairs as Tony made his way to the podium.

“Alright, let’s start,” Tony said, placing his hands comfortably on either side of the podium and lifting his chin slightly. He looked a little too stiff, too rehearsed and perfect.

“Yeah, no. Not until we fix...this.” On the last word, Peter gestured to Tony’s entire body, shaking his head.

“What’s wrong with this? I’m in control of the room, I’m projecting confidence,” Tony protested, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“Maybe so, but you seem stiff. Inauthentic.” Peter walked up to Tony, gesturing to his shoulders. “You’re holding tension here, it screams at me that you’re just repeating something you’ve rehearsed. You’re not being real.” Peter placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder, pushing them down slightly. “Yes, you want to be in control. But you don’t want to be controlling and too authoritarian. It’ll put us on edge, and the tone won’t be as friendly as it could be if you were just more relaxed.” Their eyes met, and Tony’s gaze flickered to Peter’s lips. For a split second, Tony leaned in and Peter jerked back, almost falling over his own feet as he rapidly backed up.

“Uh, okay. So-so let’s see your stance,” Peter said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Had it always been so hot in here?

Tony stood at the podium, gripping the sides with relaxed arms and a much more open posture. His shoulders were lower, body language softer.

“Great. Looks good,” Peter said, biting his lip for a split second. “Alright. Just...remember that. Control, but not controlling. You want to look open to questioning, not like you’re expecting someone to shoot you.” Tony chuckled, and Peter cracked a smile. “Voters will like this better too,

you look more trustworthy. If you're tense, that reads as nervous, and they might think you have something to hide."

"Good to know. See, you're helping this campaign already," Tony said with a bright smile, and Peter pointed at him.

"I'm helping *you*, Tony. Not your campaign. I'm a journalist, not one of your advisors or something. This is strictly...personal." Not strictly professional - what was professional about this?

Literally nothing.

"Correction noted," Tony said, mimicking writing something down on a piece of paper. Peter made himself comfortable in one of the middle chairs, the squirt gun sitting beside him.

"Alright, let's start with an easy question so we can see how you respond to a question non-verbally."

"Isn't the point of answering a question to respond verbally?" Tony snarked with a little smile. Peter rolled his eyes.

"When you're answering a question, what you *don't* say is just as important as what you *do* say. Are you making eye contact, or are you looking elsewhere? Do you tense up again, or does it not faze you?"

Tony nodded. "Right. I know that from watching the videos of other politicians. I was just kidding around."

"So you *are* rehearsed," Peter pointed out, grinning a little bit when he realized his intuition had been spot-on yet again. He was a little embarrassed about not recognizing the joke - Tony Stark was smarter than that. He wouldn't have been oblivious to nonverbal cues and what people infer from them.

"I did my due diligence and researched thoroughly," Tony said, slightly evading the accusation but providing an answer. Peter's eyes widened and he sprang up and out of his chair, pointing at the man. Tony's eyes widened in surprise. "What?"

"That! That's what you need to do. That was a great answer!" Peter said excitedly before blushing and reining in his excitement. There was no need to act that way - he could be calmer when expressing his happiness over Tony making the right call.

"Really?" Tony asked, cocking an eyebrow. "I didn't really answer the question."

"Welcome to being a politician, Tony." Peter put his hands up in the universal gesture for *what are you gonna do?* "It was good. Diplomatic, but you brushed off the accusation and didn't give me ammunition by responding to it directly. You also didn't get emotional."

"Or flirt with you." Tony shot Peter a wink, and the younger man flushed a deep pink, glancing away at the wall and putting his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah. Or that," he said with a forced little laugh, trying to forget the confident advance the man had made not a week prior. "But that proves you *do* have the right instincts. We just have to make sure you can do that when it's not an easy question."

"Gimme a good one, then. Come on, I can take it," Tony lifted his hands from the podium and crooked his fingers, gesturing for Peter to come towards him. The journalist sat back down in his

chair, glancing down at his notebook and looking back up at the man.

“Mr. Stark, why is this important to you?” He asked, electing to give Tony an easier question so he could observe those non-verbal cues like he’d said he was going to.

“Could you elaborate? What do you mean by ‘this’?” Tony asked, lowering his hands to the podium again and cocking his head to the side slightly. The motion made him look curious but not idiotic, like he was seeking clarification and didn’t just totally misunderstand the question. Peter scribbled down some notes. He’d give them to Tony later - if he kept interrupting him, they’d never get through this.

“Politics. Government. The Senate. Any of those things, or all of them. Why are they important to you?” Peter rephrased.

“Thank you for the clarification, and for the question. I’m happy to have the opportunity to discuss just how important our democracy is to me.” Peter scribbled down some notes as Tony made direct eye contact, giving a respectful nod before turning to address the rest of the imaginary press pool.

Good job directly addressing reporter - make them feel seen/heard = more likely to view you favorably.

“There is nothing more important in this country than our democracy,” Tony began, and Peter made note of how nothing in his body language shifted. A solid start, but he wondered if that would hold up on deeper questioning. “Our government has become riddled with partisan squabbles, fighting within parties, and citizens are tired of constant legislative gridlock. I think as an independent, as an outside to politics, I could bring an important voice and opportunity to move our country away from polarized affairs and something that closer resembles the democracy we all hold so dearly. We all love this country, clearly. If we didn’t, I wouldn’t be running for office, and even if I was, you all wouldn’t give a damn.”

Peter chuckled, nodding in approval and hastily writing a note about good usage of humor.

“Our democracy and government is important to me because I know what it can do if it’s properly functioning, and right now, it’s not. I’m an engineer - fixing things is what I do. I’m confident I can help fix this country.”

Peter nodded, raising his pen to his lips and taking a moment to gather his thoughts as Tony turned to him.

“Overall, that was great. The nonverbal cues were fine, nothing to comment on there because nothing changed. The humor was good, but you need to be careful not to overdo it with that. You walk that line well, though.” Peter hummed as Tony nodded, writing down some notes of his own. “I like that line about being an engineer, but I wouldn’t say you want to fix the country. That implies it’s broken.”

“Isn’t it?” Tony asked. Peter shrugged.

“I mean, the argument could be made that it is. But I would change the wording. Say you can fix the partisan divide. The in-fighting. Something tangible that voters see and *want* to be fixed. I just wouldn’t declare your love for the country and then promptly say it’s broken.” Peter shrugged and Tony considered it for a moment.

“What if I argued that it was? I could go on further with that, explain what I meant.”

“You could. I think that was a good place to end your answer though, and even if you do, your

words might be twisted until it looks like you said democracy was dead already. I'd tread carefully with that. You know your thoughts better than I do." Peter looked back down at his notebook.

"Alright, let's keep going. I'm taking notes, I promise. I'm not wasting your time." Tony pointed down at his paper and Peter felt something warm fill his chest at the acknowledgement that his time and expertise was important to the billionaire. That he wasn't wasting his time by doing this.

"I'll give you my notes, too. But thanks." Peter cleared his throat. "Mr. Stark, what would you say to constituents who are concerned about someone with direct ties to one of the world's largest weapons manufacturers sitting in our nation's government?" Tony's mouth dropped open and he leaned forward, bracing his arms on the podium.

"You already asked that question!" He protested.

"You never answered it," Peter shot back. "You wanted my help, I'm helping. Answer the question."

Tony groaned, leaning his head back and yelping when a shot of water hit him in the throat, looking back at the journalist. "What the hell, Parker?!"

Peter grinned and lowered the squirt gun, eyes twinkling mischievously. "You wanted my help," he repeated.

"Yeah, I meant your advice! Not being shot with a squirt gun!" Tony exclaimed, wiping the water from his skin. Peter shrugged, unapologetic.

"Call it an incentive not to give a bad answer," he said. "My friends and I used this method in college, practicing putting together good questions on the spot. If it was a crap question, or an easy one, you got blasted."

"So you vouch for its usefulness," Tony said skeptically, eyeing Peter critically and fighting back a smile.

"I do," Peter agreed with a nod. "My friend MJ said it even worked on the most hopeless of cases, and, well..."

"Wow," Tony said, dragging the word out and looking unimpressed. "I'm a hopeless case?"

"You said it, not me. Now answer the question," Peter said, lifting the squirt gun again and preparing to fire.

"Okay! Okay!" Tony held his hands up in mock surrender. He opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated. "Is this payback for me publicly flirting with you?" Another shot of water to the face left Tony spluttering, wiping the water away. "Okay."

Peter bit back a laugh and waited for the man to speak.

"Thank you for giving me a chance to address those concerns. I want voters to be completely confident in their decision when they go to the ballot box, and they need to know the answer to this." Tony took a deep breath, looking down at his notes as though they would help him. He took a moment, and Peter didn't comment on it. Better to take a minute now than spend hours correcting a fumbled answer later.

"I would say to those constituents: your concerns are valid. That is a very legitimate issue and potential conflict of interest," Tony said, looking up again and sweeping his gaze across the room.

“What I would offer you in the way of reassurance is this: with my inventions, Stark Industries has been solely focused on keeping our troops safe. That is our absolute, number one priority. It’s above everything else, including our profits or stock or any of that. Bringing them home to their families, and doing our best to minimize any casualties by constantly working on the cutting-edge of military technology, is our most important mission. In Congress, my attitude would be the same. I’d be working to protect you and to make sure your lives are improved. While I can’t change where I’ve worked, I can offer that same experience as the proof that I’m a man of my word, and my work for New York won’t be affected by my work with Stark Industries.”

Peter stared at him, mouth open slightly.

Where had this savvy politician come from?

“That should have been your answer the first time,” he said, laughing weakly as Tony’s face broke out into a giant smile.

“Really? That was good?” He asked eagerly, and Peter nodded, getting up and crossing over to him.

“It was great. You addressed the issue head-on. You didn’t try to belittle the voters or tell them that wasn’t something worth worrying about. Never do that, by the way, unless you want to lose. You turned that experience, which I had framed negatively, as a way to prove your credibility and commitment. You sounded like a true politician.” Peter smiled at him. “If I’d known all it would take is some coaching, I would have suggested this after that first disaster of a press conference.”

Tony whooped, pumping a fist in the air and then grabbing Peter, dragging him in for a tight hug. “You’re incredible. A miracle worker.”

Peter broke away from the embrace after perhaps a second too long, rubbing the back of his neck again and blushing. The room seemed to get even warmer, and the younger man was sure he was going to start sweating.

“Well, let’s make sure it wasn’t a fluke. You had some time to think about that question.” Tony nodded in agreement, moving back to the podium. Peter shrugged off his suit jacket, rolling up his sleeves and sitting back down. He didn’t miss the way Tony’s eyes darkened a tad, how his gaze raked over Peter’s body appreciatively at this new development. As quickly as the look appeared, it disappeared, and the Senate hopeful smiled brightly at the journalist.

“Hit me with your best shot,” Tony said, jumping from side to side slightly in place like he was warming up for a run. Peter shook his head fondly, looking down at his notebook.

“Alright. Let’s talk about policy. What is your number one issue, and what would be your first steps to work on that policy if elected?”

It didn’t seem like an overly hard question, but Peter knew Tony had struggled with this earlier. It was worth making sure he could get through a solid answer that didn’t make him look like a bumbling buffoon.

“I always welcome the chance to talk about issues near and dear to my heart, so thanks so much for this question. My number one priority is increased funding for our research labs across the country, as I’ve talked about previously. American scientists are doing incredible work over a wide array of subjects, and they deserve our full financial support in their endeavors. I’d be elated to go to bat for them in Congress and get them the funding they deserve.”

Tony didn't continue, looking right at Peter. It was as if he was daring him to challenge him on the answer.

Peter was never one to back down from a dare.

"That's fantastic, Mr. Stark, but you didn't answer the full question. What would be your first steps to work on that policy if elected?"

Tony took another moment, kicking his foot slightly. Peter immediately shot him with the water gun, and the billionaire looked at him incredulously.

"Don't do that foot thing. You look like a child who got in trouble." Tony nodded and took another breath before starting to speak.

"My first step would be to speak with my colleagues, get a group together and write a bill increasing funding for identified research labs. That would be the quickest way to address the issue directly. If that didn't work, I'd likely work on getting it into a budget bill."

"How would you identify those research labs?"

"I have a team working on that as we speak. I've given them a list of qualifiers that the researchers must meet, and-"

"So, you're not picking these labs yourself?"

"I would bring the complete list to my colleagues and work with them to identify the best possible candidates. We want to start this program off with labs that will be successful - I don't want taxpayers sinking their money into a lost cause."

Peter broke out into a wide smile, nodding. "That was great, Tony. Really. I don't get why you couldn't do this before."

"Maybe I could, and I just wanted an excuse for you to stay longer," Tony shot back, stepping out from behind the podium and crossing the room to sit next to Peter. The journalist stared at him, breath hitching in his throat as they gazed at each other.

"You played me?" He asked, voice soft.

"No," Tony said with a shake of his head. "I really did need the help. But I don't think I was as hopeless as you make me out to be." Slowly, he reached out and put his hand on top of Peter's. "And I did want to get to know you better."

Despite everything in his body screaming at him to do so, Peter didn't pull away.

"You...are the first person in a while that I haven't been able to charm. You don't fall for my flirtations, your brain doesn't turn to goo around me. That's not even mentioning how incredibly smart you are. A Pulitzer at your age? It's incredible." Peter blushed and looked away, earning a soft sound from the man next to him. "Don't do that. Don't take those gorgeous eyes away from me."

"I should go," Peter whispered, looking back at Tony and resisting the urge to grab the man by the lapels of his blazer and drag him in for a kiss.

"Don't," Tony practically begged. "I've never met anyone like you. I know you're a reporter and you have to stay impartial. You have to keep your integrity. But I can't ignore this. There's

something special about you, Peter. About *us*. Am I wrong?"

Peter desperately wanted to tell him that no, he wasn't wrong. That he felt strongly for the man in front of him despite barely knowing him. That there was some deep, romantic part of him that he didn't even know he had that wanted him to take that leap with Tony, to find why they worked so well and what that special thing was.

Instead, he said nothing.

"Stop me if I'm wrong, then," Tony said, leaning in and tilting his head ever so slightly. Peter's breath hitched again and his eyes fluttered closed.

Their lips met, and something ignited in Peter's chest. Something warm and comforting, that reminded him of home. But it was also something hot, resembling desire and desperation. It was clear Tony felt that way too, from the way his hand tightened around Peter's and his other arm wrapped around him, tugging him closer.

Peter's arms moved of their own accord, hands clutching at Tony's blazer in the way he'd wanted to. A soft sound escaped him as their lips moved, and Tony answered with a groan.

When they absolutely had to part for air, their lips broke apart but their foreheads stayed pressed together.

"So I wasn't wrong," Tony said with a chuckle, and Peter smiled as he shook his head. They sat in silence for a moment, tangled in each other's arms and holding on tightly.

Slowly, the reality of what had just happened began to sink in, and Peter stared at Tony. Somehow he was simultaneously turned on and horrified at what had just happened. The journalist pulled away from the embrace, standing up and grabbing his blazer.

"I can't," he whispered, running a hand through his hair. "I can't-I shouldn't have kissed you, Tony."

"First of all, *I kissed you*," Tony pointed out, standing up and trying to reach out for Peter, who jerked back and looked at him with wide eyes. "Second of all, we can figure this out. I know your career is important to you, but you know as well as I do that we have...something."

Peter shook his head.

"My career is *everything* to me, and I'll lose it all if anyone finds out I kissed the candidate I'm covering," he pointed out, putting his blazer back on. "I can't do this, Tony. If you lose, let's talk. But I can't."

"I don't want to wait to lose," Tony protested. "Can't we just...try this? I'm not going to use this against you. You can have both. Your career and whatever we have. Peter, *please*."

Peter shook his head again.

"I'm sorry, Tony. I can't. I feel it too, but I can't." Peter gazed at him, giving into his impulses and leaning in to give the man a soft kiss on the cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispered one more time, grabbing his bag and fleeing the room.

Chapter 6

Tony's life *should* have been improving after the session with Peter in his personal lab three weeks ago.

Peter had written a piece based on the questions he'd asked in the practice session, and while he still didn't let up in his criticisms of Tony's inexperience, he no longer commented on his inability to answer the tough questions. When Tony had heard the New York Times had placed Peter's article on the front page, he'd immediately gone to pick up a copy. He was desperate to know what the man thought of him, and if he'd mentioned any of the unprofessional things he had done and said that day. The headline told him everything he needed to know.

Stark Shows Some Promise Despite Inexperience, Lack of Clear Vision. By Peter Parker.

He wasn't sure if he was pleased or disappointed to see that Peter's opinion of him hadn't changed much.

Peter had published several pieces on him by now: critiquing the plans he'd unveiled for research funding; covering his lack of interactions with voters, and subsequently reviewing the events he'd begun to host. He'd also begun writing articles digging skeletons out of Tony's closet: a government contract that had fallen through because they didn't trust the weaponry Stark Industries wanted to provide. He'd mentioned an interview with Obadiah Stane that he chose not to publish because the man was clearly heavily biased against Tony. Though he was skeptical of the billionaire himself, Peter had said he refused to publish such a vitriolic interview.

Tony had subscribed to the New York Times so he could keep up on the man's work, reading every article like a starved man presented with a full Thanksgiving dinner.

Since that practice session, Tony hadn't been able to talk to Peter again. Not one-on-one. The journalist still attended every event as he'd been assigned to do, and consistently asked the tough questions that had made the billionaire squirm just a few weeks ago. But after each event he was the first one out the door, and the way they'd made eye contact, matching smiles present on their faces, had disappeared. The witty banter was gone. Peter stared intently at the wall just to Tony's right as he asked his questions, and almost never asked a follow-up and never snarked with him like he'd used to.

Even the kids online who had started commenting about what a cute couple they would make had picked up on the changes.

Why does Peter always look like a kicked puppy at these things now? Someone give him a hug. Preferably Tony.

Tony not flirting with Peter anymore is a goddamn atrocity.

What the fuck happened to these two?

Tony sighed, glancing at the time. It was almost noon, at which point he'd be hosting a group of high school students to talk about why STEM education was important to them. Pepper had thought it would be good for him to be connected to the kids whose education he was trying to improve, and being good with kids always helped a politician look good.

With only two weeks to go until the election, he knew he desperately needed to prove he was serious and look good doing it. Tony still had a lot of voters to win over, and he knew it. While he

was faring well in the polls, only a few points behind the two big nominees, he knew he needed to be *ahead* if he stood any chance of winning as a write-in candidate.

Peter's help had been a real turning point for his campaign. Everyone was commenting on how much better he was handling harder questions, how much he sounded like a real politician rather than a billionaire playing dress-up.

Tony and Peter had kept their mouths shut about that practice session, though it was an unspoken agreement. They both knew it would be disastrous for Peter's career if word got out - it would look like favoritism at best, a cover for a hookup at worst.

"Ready to go?" Pepper said, knocking on the door. Tony startled out of his thoughts, looking down at the paper where Peter's words stuck out to him.

He had to show more than *some* promise.

Not for the first time, Tony was overwhelmed with the urge to prove the reporter wrong. Peter's critiques had turned into his encouragement, forcing him to think about why he was making certain decisions and the ramifications of every action and every word. He was glad to see their brief kiss all those weeks ago hadn't changed how Peter wrote about him. Tony wasn't one for sugar-coating, and appreciated the bluntness and honesty with which Peter wrote every piece. It was refreshing, and a reality check that he often sorely needed.

"Tony," Pepper prompted. "It's time to go, whether you're ready or not." Tony nodded, brushing his fingers over the newspaper and standing up from his desk. They entered the elevator in silence, Tony adjusting his tie and avoiding eye contact with Pepper.

"Is it Parker?" She asked after a few moments. "I know he's tough, but honestly, what he's been writing recently has been far more generous than he usually is. He's honestly probably been helping you out."

"Is *what* Parker?" Tony asked, ignoring the rest of what she had said. If only she knew *just how much* Peter had helped him out.

"The reason you've been moping for the past three weeks," Pepper shot back. "I'll admit you do a good job of convincing the press and the public that you're totally fine, but I know that you're not. You rarely come out of the lab anymore, you're not excited about this campaign, and you don't even *attempt* to look at my ass anymore."

Tony chuckled, but there was no life to it. Sighing heavily, he looked down at his shoes and clasped his hands together behind his back.

"I kissed him."

"You kissed *Peter Parker*?" Pepper asked, clearly shocked. "And he *let* you?"

"Oh yeah, he let me. And then he promptly freaked out, apologized more times than I care to count, and ran out," Tony explained.

"I'm not surprised. He could lose his job for that."

"Don't remind me," Tony said with a sigh. That guilt had been eating at him ever since Peter fled the tower. If anyone ever found out about the two of them, they'd have enough leverage to keep Peter from ever working as a journalist again. Tony would likely be fine, but the danger to the young Pulitzer winner was enough to make the older man incredibly careful with what he said and

who he said it to.

“That explains a lot, actually,” Pepper mused. The pair fell silent after that. The elevator doors opened and she grabbed onto his shoulder. “Just...try to put it out of your brain. Once this is all over, we’ll figure out what to do.” Tony gave her a smile, patting her hand.

“I’m Tony Stark. I always figure out what to do,” he said confidently. With that, he strode confidently into the flashing cameras, smiling brightly and waving to the people gathered there.

Seeing Tony walk out with that beaming smile, the easy confidence Peter had taught him, and to the cheers of the students who had been invited to the event hurt way more than Peter had ever anticipated.

The past three weeks had been incredibly stressful for the journalist. Every time someone called his name, his heart rate leaped so high that his smartwatch gently reminded him to take deep breaths. He was paranoid someone was going to find out about him and Tony, about their private practice session and about the kiss.

The deep, passionate, perfect kiss.

The kiss that was like something out of a movie - not that Peter would ever, *ever* admit that aloud.

Ever since then, he’d done his best to distance himself from the billionaire. He refocused on his original assignment: to figure out why Tony Stark was running for Senate in the first place. Peter still attended the campaign events, but Ned was now a permanent fixture at his side. He planned his questions carefully so as to minimize his interactions with Tony, and he knew the other man had noticed. The flicker of disappointment in those eyes, the way Ned nudged him repeatedly when Tony looked over at him, all pointed to a man who was pining after Peter. Peter was pining just as hard for Tony, but knew he couldn’t act on his feelings.

His career was everything to him, he’d meant what he said in the labs that day. He couldn’t risk blowing up everything he’d built just because Tony was a good kisser.

...but *was* it just a good kiss?

Peter was terrified of the answer to that question.

“Dude, he’s staring at you,” Ned hissed in his ear, and Peter was jolted back into the present. The event was starting, and even though Tony’s full attention should have been on the young girl explaining her love of biochemistry, his gaze was locked on Peter. The reporter couldn’t help but stare back for a few moments before dropping his gaze to his notepad.

Ned knew about everything that had happened three weeks ago, but was smart enough not to make any comments when they were surrounded by people that could overhear.

The event proceeded flawlessly, likely thanks to Pepper Potts’ planning. Each child had the chance to tell Tony what they were passionate about in STEM education, whether it be climate change, cancer cure research, or a type of calculus Peter had never even heard of. Tony was engaged with the kids, asking them questions and making witty comments that had everyone in the room laughing along with him. As the kids filed out, Tony turned to the press pool.

“It’s been great having you all here, thanks so much for joining us today. I have a few minutes to take some questions, so hit me with your best shot.”

Peter flinched at the repeated phrase from that day in the lab.

“Hit me with your best shot,” Tony said, jumping from side to side slightly.

“Mr. Stark, would you consider broadening your focus from STEM education to education in general?” One woman in the back piped up.

“Great question,” Tony started with a nod. “I had given that some thought, yes, but I think it best for me to stick with my area of expertise. I wouldn’t appreciate it if an author started telling me how to invent, and I doubt the teachers of America would appreciate me telling them how to teach.” A ripple of laughter sounded from the gathered group, and Tony gestured to a man closer to Peter.

“What were you hoping to gain from speaking to these students today?”

“I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again: kids like those are our future. We need to listen to what their interests are and stand up for them so they have every opportunity to pursue their passions, wherever that may lead them.”

“Do you support only STEM-related passions?” The reporter asked, not shy about following up.

“Of course not,” Tony said, his brow furrowing. “I support today’s youth following whatever dreams make them happy. Be it engineering, music, math, or art, everyone has something different to call their own. Their passion. Their place of happiness. I’d be thrilled to support bills in Congress supporting other programs, but my focus is on STEM because that’s what I know best and where I feel I can do the most good.” A few people nodded their heads in agreement, and for a moment only the sound of pens scratching furiously on paper filled the room.

“Mr. Parker, did you have a question?”

Peter slowly looked up from his notebook, his grip around the item tightening until his knuckles were almost white. Honestly, couldn’t Tony just leave him alone?

As soon as he thought it, Peter mentally took it back. He didn’t really want Tony to leave him alone.

Pushing all of that aside, he nodded. “Yes, I do. The latest polls show you trailing the Democratic nominee by just five points. Are you confident in your ability to pull ahead and win at this stage in the race?”

Tony hummed softly. “I think polls are overrated. I’m not too worried about it.”

What?

Peter was shocked at the answer. He knew Tony could do better than that, so why was he blowing it? He should have had that in the bag.

Slowly, Peter recognized what the man was doing. He was deliberately giving a bad answer, one that would likely piss people off, just to get Peter to keep interacting with him.

How sweet.

Stupid.

He meant stupid.

“Mr. Stark, those polls are a reflection of the voters’ preferences at this point. Are you saying you think the voters’ opinions are overrated?” Peter shot back, a little bit of anger rising to the surface. They were in this position because of Tony kissing him in the first place, and now the other man had the audacity to make it worse.

Well. It hadn’t *entirely* been Tony’s fault.

“You know, Mr. Parker, I’ll need to review those poll numbers before I answer the question. If you hang back, I’ll get you your answer. Everyone else, it’s been great to see you. Miss Potts will be sending out the details for the event later on this week.” Tony clapped his hands together, and everyone started to disperse.

Peter was frozen.

Once again, the suave billionaire was one step ahead and Peter had played right into his hand.

“See you at the office, dude. I’ll let Jameson know what’s up,” Ned said, clapping Peter on the shoulder and making his way out.

Once the room was empty save for Tony and Peter, the reporter exploded.

“What the fuck was that, Tony?! Calling me out in front of journalists from every major news outlet in the country? You might as well have screamed ‘I kissed Peter Parker’ to the entire room!” Peter yelled, gesturing to the closed door before crossing his arms.

“I wish I had!” Tony yelled back, clearly feeling the same pent-up frustration as the other. “I wish I had told them all! I want everyone to know!”

“*No one* can know!”

“I know!” The two stood in silence for a moment, breathing hard with flushed faces and clenched fists.

“Tony, I told you. I can’t-” Peter started, voice cracking as he struggled to keep tears at bay. This was too much - being in a room with the man he desperately wanted but couldn’t have was proving to be overwhelming.

“But you *can*. We can try this, keep it a secret, and if I win then we’ll figure it out,” Tony said, taking a step closer. The younger man didn’t move away.

“And if you do win, then what? I stay your secret?” Peter asked in a whisper.

“I-I don’t know,” Tony admitted. “But between the two of us, we’ve got the combined IQ of, like, thirty Stephen Hawking’s. We’ll figure it out.” Peter cracked a little smile, almost daring to hope for a moment before shaking his head.

“I can’t,” he repeated. It sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to convince the other.

“You can’t,” Tony repeated, voice raising slightly again. “I’m putting myself out there, Peter, and you won’t even meet me halfway!”

“Halfway is too far!” Peter yelled back. “You wouldn’t lose anything but I could lose everything, and I’m not going to take that chance!”

“What, I’m not worth it?” Tony asked, voice practically dripping with venom.

“Of course you’re worth it!” Peter practically screamed, shocking them both into silence. “Of course you are,” he repeated softly after taking a second to breathe. “But it’s too much, it’s too fast, and there’s too many unknowns. I can’t roll the dice on my career when I don’t even know if we’d have a shot at a real relationship.”

“We’d have a real relationship. Trust me.” Tony looked at him pleadingly, taking another few steps closer and reaching out to hold Peter’s hand.

“It’s not real if I’m a secret, Tony.”

“You think I’d *want* to keep you a secret?” The older man asked in a hushed tone. “I don’t. I want to take you out on dates in Central Park. I want to meet your friends, your Aunt May with the killer chocolate chip cookies. I want to buy every copy of the New York Times and plaster your articles all over my damn building. I want to brag about *my boyfriend* being a Pulitzer prize winner.” Tony hesitated. “I want all of that. You just have to trust me, and meet me halfway.”

Peter stared at him, gripping the man’s hand like a lifeline.

“Do you trust me?” Tony whispered.

In lieu of an answer, Peter used his free hand to tug him in and kiss him deeply. Tony wrapped Peter in his arms eagerly, holding on tightly like he was afraid he might vanish.

Sweet, lazy kisses quickly turned fiercer and more desperate. Three weeks of almost no contact between them had each man aching for the other, desperate to hold onto, kiss, and touch every part of each other. Tony broke the kiss first, trailing his lips down Peter’s neck and smiling against the skin when the younger man moaned softly.

“Something tells me we should move this to my penthouse,” Tony breathed against soft skin, and Peter didn’t hesitate to drag Tony in for another heated kiss to signify his agreement.

The two stumbled to the elevator, so lost in each other’s lips and hands that neither one noticed a slim figure holding out an iPhone around the corner, the camera pointed in their direction.

Chapter 7

Tony woke to his blankets being pulled at, the warm weight in his arms shuffling around and jostling him far too much for his liking. Grumbling softly, he tightened his grip and pulled the squirming figure closer, smiling lazily when a soft laugh rang out in his bedroom.

“Tony, I have to go,” Peter whispered, and Tony cracked an eye open to look down at him. The sight he was met with was glorious - big brown doe eyes and tousled brown hair that looked like it might just be the softest thing on the planet.

“I’ll call Jameson, you’re not going anywhere,” Tony grumbled, pulling Peter closer.

After their rather...physical make-up, Peter had called Jameson to say he wasn’t feeling well and would work remotely for the rest of the day. Instead of actually doing that, though, he’d fallen into bed with Tony and hadn’t left it again.

“I think I’d rather have him walk in on us than have you call him to explain why I’m not going to be at work,” Peter said with another laugh. Tony’s face screwed up in disgust and he rolled Peter out of his arms, ignoring the indignant squawk the other man let out.

“That’s it, moment over. It’s done. You’ve ruined it,” he deadpanned, grabbing at the covers and dragging them over to his side. Surprisingly strong, Peter pulled them back so they were even and leaned in to give Tony a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” he murmured, somewhat shy at using the pet name. Tony beamed at him, feeling his heart skip a beat at the verbal acknowledgement from the journalist that there was something between them, something special and romantic and deep that neither of them could explain but that both of them felt.

“Do you really have to go?” Tony asked, pouting ever so slightly. “Let’s make breakfast at the very least. I bet your commute to work is shorter from here, and it’s only-” Tony glanced at his phone. “-seven in the morning. We have plenty of time.”

“Hmm,” Peter hummed thoughtfully, tapping a finger against his chin. “Do you cook shirtless? That’s the Parker rule, you know. Shirtless cooking or I don’t stay for breakfast.”

“I think that could be arranged.”

After each of them had showered and dressed, the pair entered the kitchen together. Peter was borrowing one of Tony’s blazers to try and help hide the fact he was wearing yesterday’s clothes, which had somehow made their way into the laundry and were clean and fresh when he found them that morning. Tony had kept his promise, slipping on a pair of gray sweatpants and forgoing a shirt. Neither one was complaining about the view.

“So, what’s for breakfast, Chef Tony?” Peter asked as he perched gingerly on a bar stool at the kitchen island. Tony turned from where he was poking through the contents of his fridge, raising an eyebrow.

“What makes you think I’m cooking?” Tony snarked, and Peter fixed him with an unimpressed look.

“You railed my ass six ways from Sunday yesterday. I’m going to rest and you’re going to make me whatever it is you normally have for breakfast around here. It’s the least you can do, honestly.” Peter sniffed in mock arrogance, but cracked a smile as soon as he heard Tony’s laughter echoing through the kitchen.

“You’ve got a point, Parker. Prepare to be amazed by my omelettes.” Tony turned and grabbed a whole carton of eggs, as well as some cheese and a few fresh tomatoes. Peter watched, enraptured, as the man skillfully and quickly sliced the tomato and grated some of the cheese before preparing the frying pan. Cracking a few eggs into it, Tony hummed softly as he started making the first omelette.

Peter didn’t want to bring up the elephant in the room, but he knew he had to. Too much had happened yesterday for the two of them to just carry on ignoring each other and then releasing all the pent-up frustration in a sex marathon in the middle of Peter’s work day.

“So, what do we do now?” He asked softly, fiddling with the sleeve of Tony’s blazer. “I mean, we can’t exactly be public. At least not until we figure out the outcome of the race.” Tony sighed, shaking his head.

“As much as I’d love to argue that, you’re right. I won’t do anything to put your career in jeopardy.”

“Thank you,” Peter said sincerely. “I mean that. Not that I think you would, but you have enough ammunition now to totally wreck my life. I appreciate you telling me that you, y’know, won’t do that.” Tony laughed, but it was a much softer and diluted sound than before.

“I think our best bet is to keep this a secret for now, and revisit this conversation after the election. Once we know who won, we can make a plan. For now, there’s no use planning when it could all go to shit.” Peter nodded, agreeing with everything the billionaire was saying. “Your career and your integrity comes first.”

“Thank you,” Peter repeated. “You also need to keep your image as one of America’s most eligible bachelors - that’s definitely winning you some women’s votes. Maybe some men’s votes, too.”

“On that note,” Tony started, whirling around and pointing the spatula at the reporter in a way Peter thought was supposed to look threatening. “You’d better not go changing your tune now that you’ve had the absolute pleasure-”

“Oh my god.”

“-of sleeping with me. Got it? I won’t have Peter Parker changing his opinions just cause he thinks my dick is great.”

Groaning, Peter put his head in his hands. Tony laughed once more, turning back around and continuing to make the omelettes. Once both were made, the two men sat side-by-side and dug into their food.

“This is incredible, Tony. Seriously. First the hot chocolate and now this?” Peter said after swallowing his first bite, eagerly cutting himself another piece.

“I’m Tony Stark. I’m the best at everything I do,” Tony said with a shrug, a playful glint in his eyes.

“Except not fucking the people covering your campaign.”

“Touché.”

After breakfast, Tony insisted on walking Peter to the door like “a real gentleman,” since he obviously couldn’t accompany him down to the lobby and out to the street. That would raise far too much suspicion - Peter was already going to be hard-pressed to keep himself from being seen or recognized as it was. Add Tony Stark into the equation, and it was game over.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the voter town hall,” Peter murmured as he leaned up and gave Tony a soft kiss. “I promise not to be nice about you in the paper.”

“The cornerstone of any healthy relationship: destroying your significant other in a national newspaper,” Tony deadpanned, delighting in the laugh he got out of Peter. “I’ll see you then.”

Peter leaned in, pressing a sweet kiss to Tony’s lips and lifting a hand to cup his cheek. Tony wrapped his arms around the shorter man and tugged him closer, almost lifting him off his feet before gently letting go.

“See you later, Tony.”

“Bye, Peter.” The two shared a soft smile, gazing into each other’s eyes until the elevator doors closed between them.

The next week passed by in a blur - of campaign events, shaking hands, press conferences, stolen kisses in the moments no one was around, and the two men sharing a bed on more than one occasion.

Peter could hardly believe it was just a week until the election. Even more so, he couldn’t believe he was writing his last feature on Tony’s Senate campaign. The media had agreed on halting any opinion or feature on any of the candidates in the week leading up to the election, giving voters a chance to do their research without scandalous headlines that the candidates had no time or chance to respond to.

Staring at his computer, Peter found himself struggling with what to write - a problem that hadn’t popped up as long as he’d been covering Tony. First, the words came easy, laced with disdain for a man clearly out of touch with the voters. Then, praise for his improvements came mixed with continuing critiques of his shortcomings. Now, he didn’t know quite how to wrap everything up.

Tony had come a long ways, sure, but Peter had his doubts about whether it would be enough to win him the seat. He’d entered too late, had too little time to connect with voters and get his message out there, and had fumbled through the first week - valuable time lost to stutters and deflections when he could have been already establishing strength and credibility.

It was with that realization of doubt that Peter found his headline.

Too Soon For Stark.

Short, sweet, and to the point. Tony had done a great job creating a platform, running a campaign, and connecting with the people of New York. But he had a timing problem, something that could only be fixed by running for Senate properly in the future. Peter began to write all of those thoughts, emphasizing it wasn’t that he didn’t think Tony was completely in over his head, but rather that it was a good idea at the wrong time.

Tony Stark started his campaign by blatantly flirting with any reporter that dared ask him a serious

question. Six weeks later, he's proven to be a formidable opponent for the Democrat and Republican nominees, with poll numbers steadily creeping upwards and increasing numbers at his events.

What Stark suffers from is a lack of preparation and a lack of time. With a properly-run Senate campaign, he might stand a chance when the next seat is up for grabs. However, combine barely a month and a half to put everything together with the fact that Stark's name won't even appear on the ballots New Yorkers receive next week, and the recipe for loss seems clear.

Peter continued to work on the article, the endeavor taking up his entire morning. When it was finally ready to be published around lunch, Jameson strode over to his desk.

"How's that last article coming?" He asked, perching on the edge of Peter's desk like he always did. Wordlessly, the journalist turned the monitor so his boss could read it for himself, relaxing slightly in his chair as Jameson nodded along and muttered words of agreement under his breath.

"Looks great. Let's get that up on the website now, and then I want you to head on over to Stark Industries with Ned for the last press conference he's doing. I want to get a review of it out online before the embargo sets in."

"Sounds good," Peter agreed with a nod, waiting for Jameson to walk away before turning his monitor around to face him again and publishing the article to the website. It immediately started to garner attention, and he felt a flash of pride as he watched his article, his words, get picked up and shared by people from around the world.

"Ready to head out?" Peter looked up to see Ned eagerly waiting to leave, camera firmly in hand.

"Let's do it," he said, grinning back at his friend and grabbing his bag before heading for the doors.

When they arrived at Stark Industries, Peter and Ned were instructed to head to the room they'd been using for all the press conferences and for giving statements. A fair amount of the press pool was already there, setting up cameras and recording devices in preparation for the event. Ned and Peter went to their usual spot in one of the middle rows, towards the right of the room. It was a great angle for Ned's photos, and allowed for Tony to make eye contact with Peter quite frequently under the guise of sweeping his gaze across the room.

"I can't believe this is the last press conference we're doing together," Ned remarked as he fiddled with his camera. Peter shrugged, taking out his phone and opening up Twitter.

"It won't be the last one, bud. Maybe the last one here, but I'm sure Jameson will have us suiting up and heading out together again sooner rather than later."

"I hope so. I love getting out of the office and getting to take real pictures. Betty over in HR said she really liked the one I got of Stark laughing with the kid."

"That's awesome, dude!" Peter said, looking up from his phone to smile at his friend. Ned had had a huge crush on Betty for the longest time, so he was thrilled to hear his friend was making some progress.

"Thanks. It was a pretty big confidence boost," Ned bragged. Peter snorted and looked back down, heart stopping as he read what was rapidly becoming the number one trending item in the world.

EXPOSED: Stark Hooking Up With Pulitzer Parker?

The headline was accompanied by a picture that made it all too obvious what was going on. Tony and Peter were headed for the elevator, Tony's hand on his ass and their lips mere inches apart. Against his better judgment, Peter clicked the link and began to read.

Peter Parker, darling of the New York Times and youngest-ever Pulitzer prize winner, was seen recently making out with Tony Stark. A source provided us with these photos, as well as some of Parker leaving Stark Industries the next morning. The two haven't been photographed together since then. It's safe to say journalistic integrity is officially dead, and here's the proof.

Parker published a scathing critique of Stark's campaign a mere hour ago, which has us wondering: is he legit, or did Stark just never give him a call back?

Phones began chiming all over the room, each sound feeling like the nail in the coffin of Peter's career. He began to tremble, shoving his phone into his pocket before he dropped it from shaky hands.

"Oh my god," Ned echoed, staring at the news alert on his own phone.

"I have to get out of here," Peter blurted out. He was suffocating - everyone was too close, the walls were closing in. He could practically hear Jameson firing him, screaming at him in front of the whole office. Tony wouldn't want to see him - his Senate campaign was fucked. All because of Peter.

The journalist stood up from his seat and bolted out of the room.

Two floors up, Tony's phone began chiming with the rest of the press pool, though he didn't know it. His face paled and he began to shake with rage as he took in the headline and the photo.

"Fuck!" Tony yelled, standing up from his desk and running to the elevator. He had to see Peter. When the elevator didn't arrive quite fast enough, he made a beeline for the stairs, throwing the door open and rushing down them as fast as he could. He knew Peter was likely in the building already, and would be seeing this along with everyone else. Tony had to get to him before anything bad happened, before accusations were hurled around and the poor journalist found himself at the center of a media frenzy.

Part of Tony wondered if he was going to be too late anyway, but he knew he had to try.

Once he reached the correct floor, he flung the door open and ran to the press room. As soon as he entered, cameras started flashing and people started screaming questions at him.

"Mr. Stark, is it true you had an affair with Peter Parker?"

"Does he have valid concerns about you, or is he bitter that you ghosted him?"

"Is Parker good in bed?"

Tony ignored all the questions, looking around the room frantically for Peter. His eyes finally found the boy Peter always came with, who subtly shook his head.

Peter was gone.

Rushing out of the room, Tony ran down to the lobby as fast as he could. His heart skipped a beat when he saw a familiar figure rushing for the doors.

“Peter!” He yelled out, ignoring the few people who were present in the room. Peter skidded to a stop, looking back. Tony’s heart broke a little more when he saw the tears streaming down his face.

“Did you have a good time playing me again?” Peter asked, voice hoarse as he turned to face Tony. “Was it fun, playing with my emotions and making me look like an emotional idiot to the entire world?”

“What are you talking about?” Tony asked, taking a few steps to get closer.

“I know you leaked the pictures. Come on. I publish my last article about you, critiquing your run and saying you’re going to lose, and then *magically* photos of the two of us come to light that make everyone question whether or not I’m legitimate?” Tony winced. It did look bad.

“I know it looks like I leaked that, but I *swear* to you that I didn’t,” he said, putting his hands up in surrender. “I wouldn’t do that to you, Peter. I know how important your career is, and I haven’t forgotten the talk we had.”

Peter blinked, looking like he wanted to believe him but unsure if he could. Tony couldn’t blame him - the evidence was damning and stacked against him.

“Swear to me. Look me in the eyes and tell me you didn’t do this,” he said, tone almost pleading. Tony gazed directly into Peter’s eyes, never breaking eye contact.

“Peter, I swear to you on my life that I had nothing to do with that article. I’m so sorry this is happening,” he said sincerely, voice never wavering. Peter sniffled, taking a few steps closer and allowing Tony to pull him into a hug. The contact was brief and had barely begun when the younger man pulled away again.

“I have to go,” he whispered.

“What? No. Stay,” Tony pleaded, grabbing onto his hands.

“I can’t. I have to go talk with Jameson, and you need me to stay far, far away from you if you want to have any chance of salvaging the campaign.” Peter looked down at his shoes.

“Fuck the campaign,” Tony said immediately. “Just-just stay. Please.” His heart cracked open a little more when Peter shook his head and pulled away, just out of reach.

“I can’t, Tony. This has to end if we’re both going to come out on the other side of this with minimal damage. I can’t be with you *and* fix my reputation.”

“Why can’t you?” Tony argued. “That’s what people in relationships do. They tackle problems together. We can handle this. Let me help you. Peter, *please*.”

Peter stood still, glancing backwards at the doors. When he looked back, he found Tony holding out an outstretched hand.

The journalist knew he had two choices. He could take the hand, accept Tony’s help, and try to fix everything with the man who’d helped him break it in the first place. Or, he could pull away, fix it on his own and allow Tony to salvage his campaign, but potentially lose the man who’d finally made him feel something.

In that moment, Peter didn't know what to choose.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

McKnight Takes Senate Seat; Owens, Stark Defeated.

That was the headline on November 9, the day after the election. Peter picked up the newspaper resting on his doormat, reading the words over and over again.

Despite everything, Tony had still lost.

“Let me help you. Peter, please.”

Peter looked at Tony’s outstretched hand, itching to take it but knowing the consequences would be even worse for the both of them if he did. Shaking his head, he backed up even further. He didn’t miss the flash of pain that crossed Tony’s face, and hated himself for being the one to put it there.

“No, Tony. You need to go back in there and salvage what you can of your campaign. I need to go talk to Jameson and find out if I still have a job. After that-” Peter choked up, fighting through the next words. “After that, I think it would be best if we stayed away from each other for a while.”

“No,” Tony protested immediately. “Peter, I just found you. I can’t lose you. We’re supposed to be in this together.” Peter shook his head, feeling like a broken record when he spoke again.

“I’m sorry, Tony. I can’t.”

He turned and rushed out of the building, ignoring the tears streaming down his face and the heartbroken way Tony called after him.

It hurt so badly to walk away, but he knew this was best. This was their best chance at fixing everything. Their best chance at getting everything back to normal.

If this was what was best, then why did it involve walking away from the man Peter had seen himself falling in love with?

Closing the door, Peter stepped into his kitchen and dropped the paper onto the counter. That was his only connection to the world of journalism nowadays, since he wasn’t working and had resolved not to read any online articles after seeing some of the hateful comments aimed at him and Tony.

Luckily, he hadn’t lost his job. Jameson found the whole affair rather hilarious, citing a sharp increase in both website traffic and subscription sales. Besides that, he wasn’t willing to lose someone who was a damn good worker and had a Pulitzer prize to their name. Instead, he’d placed Peter on administrative leave until after the election.

“This is about protecting you. You need to get out of the public eye for a while, let this blow over. When things settle, and when you’re ready, we’ll get you right back into the swing of things.”

Peter grabbed a mug and a hot chocolate packet out of his cabinets, swiping the milk from the

fridge and setting about making himself a mug of hot chocolate. Even though it wasn't nearly as good as Tony's, this had been his beverage of choice for the past week. He still couldn't stand hot coffee, and the one time he'd attempted to venture out to a Starbucks for an iced one, he'd been stopped and questioned so many times on his walk that he gave up before he even got there.

Since then, he'd settled into a routine. Pick up the newspaper. Make a mug of hot chocolate. Shower and get dressed. Eat something for breakfast. Work on projects for Aunt May or around the apartment. Eat lunch and dinner at some point. Go to bed.

It was boring as hell, and Peter missed going to work. He missed being in the middle of breaking news, interviewing people and really getting to know them. He missed Ned's constant interruptions and the sound of multiple keyboards being typed on in a single room.

Most of all, though, he missed Tony.

He missed the deep timbre of the man's voice, the way he held onto Peter tightly even in sleep, the way he could kiss slowly and deeply one minute and then hot and desperate the next. He missed exchanging snarky remarks both in a room full of reporters and in Tony's personal labs with a squirt gun in hand. He missed how *easy* it had been with Tony. How he didn't feel like he had to hide or perform for anyone. He could just...*be*.

Knowing thinking about Tony wouldn't do anything but make him feel even worse, he forced himself through the next steps of his routine. He showered and dressed in some black sweatpants and a blue long-sleeved shirt. Longer sleeves or layers had become a necessity as the autumn chill started to transition into winter weather. Peter fixed himself an omelette for breakfast, fighting back memories of shared laughter and shirtless cooks in a kitchen nothing like the one he stood in now.

Once he was finished, he settled in on his couch with May's laptop in his lap. She'd been having issues with connecting to wifi, and had asked him to take a look.

"Well, given that I have unlimited free time because the world knows I fucked a billionaire, sure."

Peter hadn't actually said that, but he had really wanted to.

A few hours later, a knock at the door sounded and Peter looked up from the laptop, confusion written all over his face. May was working a shift at the hospital and Ned was staying away in case someone tried to follow him and find where Peter lived. No one should be knocking.

Peter stood up, placing his laptop on the coffee table and crossing over to the door. He opened it a tiny bit, prepared to slam it shut if he saw a camera on the other side.

What he saw couldn't have been more different.

Tony Stark was standing on his doorstep, a bouquet of lilies in his hands and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. When Peter opened the door he pushed it up so they could make eye contact, both men frozen for a moment.

"Tony?" Peter asked as Tony simultaneously tried to greet him, opening the door more so they could stand in front of each other properly.. "What're you doing here?"

"I had to see you," Tony said, gripping the flowers a little tighter. "I'm guessing you saw the news."

"I think everyone has," Peter said, smiling a little bit despite everything. Tony snorted, nodding and

looking down at the flowers he was holding. That must have served as a reminder, as the man jolted and looked back up, thrusting the flowers out to Peter.

“These are for you. I never got around to asking what type you liked, so I asked Ned. He said lilies were your favorite.” Peter took the flowers, gently tracing a petal with one finger.

“He was right,” he said softly, leaning in to sniff them. “Thank you, Tony.”

“You’re welcome.” The older man shifted on his feet. “Though I’ll admit I didn’t just come here for a flower delivery.” Tony shoved his hands in the pocket of his jeans.

“Why are you here then?” Peter whispered, tearing his gaze from the flowers and looking back up at him.

“I’m here to ask you to take me back,” Tony said, reaching out slowly for Peter’s hand, giving the man plenty of time to move away. When he didn’t, their hands clasped together and Tony held on tightly. “The election is over. I lost, but I’m okay with that, because,” After a beat of silence, he continued. “Because I found you along the way. Someone who challenged me to be the best version of myself - to put myself in other people’s shoes and see the world they view it rather than the way I do. Someone who isn’t afraid to put me in my place, but who can appreciate my snark and fire back some of their own.” The two shared a smile as Tony paused again, each lost in their own memories of their fiery conversations. “Someone passionate, who loves their job as much as I love mine and brings the same dedication to their craft as I do. Someone incredibly smart, who can definitely keep up with me and probably outsmart me, too.”

Peter wasn’t quite sure when he’d started crying, but he leaned into the touch when Tony gently wiped the tears from his cheeks.

“I’ll get down on my knees if you want me to, but I’m begging you. And I don’t beg.” Peter chuckled weakly, earning another smile from Tony. “Please take me back. You’re the best thing that’s happened to me in a long time, and as scared as I am of screwing this up, I’m even more scared of never trying.” Tony looked at Peter, his expression so eager and open and honest that the younger man swore he felt the walls he’d been trying to build around his heart crack a little bit.

“So, what are you saying? I’m your consolation prize? Lose the Senate, win a boyfriend?” Peter asked softly, making a move to pull his hand back. He was still a little skeptical - everything Tony was saying sounded just too good to be true. Too perfect.

“You’re not my consolation prize - you’re my everything, Peter.” Tony held on a little tighter. “You’re my inspiration to do better. You’re my motivation. My fierce reporter. My first scandal.” The two shared a soft laugh before Tony grew serious again. “And I think...I think that you could be my love. If you’ll let me. I know we’ve got a lot of stuff to work through, and I know it’ll be hard. But I know you’re worth it. *We’re* worth it.” Tony paused for a moment, cocking his head to the side ever so slightly. “What do you think?”

Once again, Peter was faced with a choice. He could close the door in Tony’s face and end this right now. He could forget any of this ever happened and move on with his life without Tony Stark. Or, he could let the man in. He could see if they were right about this crazy connection. They could find out together if they could love each other. If Peter let him in, he might just get everything he had back, and find something new and beautiful that came with it.

Peter opened the door with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

And we've reached the end of Scandal! I'm sorry if the last four chapters or so felt disjointed or rushed - I was desperately trying to finish this fic before I move tomorrow (November 11) and don't have time to write anymore. I literally wrote over 11,000 words in a day. 😊

Thank you so much to everyone who has read and commented, and please know even though I likely won't be responding to comments after November 10, 2021, I will occasionally come take a look so please feel free to let me know if you liked it, hated it, or had any other feelings about it.

(Also, it didn't fit into my vision for the last chapter, so if anyone was curious, Pepper took and leaked the photos. In my mind, she saw Peter as toxic and distracting to the campaign and felt the need to not only get rid of him, but to cast doubt on every critical thing he'd written about Tony up to that point).

Much love to all of you lovely readers - thanks for embarking on this journey with me!



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